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ILLUSIONS.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "ASTRÆA," "RIVERSIDE SKETCHES," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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BOOK THE FIRST.

ILLUSIONS.

CHAPTER I.

GENIUS.

The Rev. Nicholas Longstaffe was one of those unfortunate beings cruelly endowed by a too bountiful nature with many talents. The facility with which he made beginnings was fatal to his success in life. A perilous versatility had carried him about since boyhood from one pursuit to another, without suffering him to take any rest, in a belief that he had found the vocation whereunto he was specially called. He was for ever looking about for his title-deeds to honour,

unconscious that the bar sinister of inconstancy drawn across his mind left him outside the pale of heritage.

By turns Nicholas was everything, and, of course, nothing for long. Having no axis of fixedness to turn on, his evolutions were accomplished in spurts which periodically astonished his most believing friends. However, by degrees, in fitting himself for various callings and professions, the sinews of war became wasted, and the alternatives of a lucrative hue remained but few to select from.

He was leaving his youth behind him when he became aware that he had frittered away his small patrimony to no definite purpose. One highly respectable profession, towards which he had yearned fitfully at seasons of impecuniosity, alone remained open to him. At this juncture he met the gaze of the admiring blue eyes of Charlotte Godbold. That is to say, in

his impoverished circumstances, they shone on him more pitifully and reverentially than did those of other more discreet young ladies, with precept-enforcing mammas to hint at babies and necessary bread-and-butter.

Charlotte had, moreover, in this worthy gentleman's sight, the superior advantage of being an orphan, tolerably fair to look at, and of small intellectual endowments. She was naturally bound to burn incense at the shrine of learning and wisdom; and Mr. Longstaffe lived nearly as much by vanity as by bread.

In the background this lowly minded young lady had a wealthy bachelor uncle with the patronage of some comfortable livings. He was, to wit, a baronet—Sir Maurice Godbold—of no little renown of a doubtful sort.

At the point of his wooing of Charlotte, Nicholas built all his hopes on the Church.

Beneath the secluded shelter of a country rectory, tended by the hand of a loving spouse, and shielded from the degrading anxieties of pecuniary cares, he might send his arrows and thunders of literature abroad on an ignorant world. The holy office of spiritual shepherd would amply provide for the simple requirements of himself and his bride. All Mr. Longstaffe's wants, in theory, were admirably simple. He was satisfied of course with Arcadian elements of life, as befitted a shepherd. The energy with which this good pastor professed contempt for the condiments of life, appetizing groceries and sauces, persuaded some of his flock to believe that their partiality for such things was a crime of self-indulgence.

Alas! poor Charlotte's tear-stained, tattered cookery-book told a different tale in the early years of her married life, when dainty fricassees, savoury messes, nutritious

jellies, and other delicacies were in constant demand.

Nicholas, having duly qualified for his office, passed into the Church at a side door, and was presented by Charlotte's beneficent uncle, who knew a good deal more about ballet-dancers than parsons, with the living of Lakenham. Sir Maurice Godbold resided on the other side of the county, as everybody in Flatshire knew, and did not greatly concern himself about spiritual administrations.

The rectory at Lakenham was swept and garnished at the patron's expense during the honeymoon period, spent by Nicholas in prosecuting archæological studies, to the sore disappointment of the bride, who had anticipated a series of halcyon days, when her lover would quote poetry at her little feet.

Sir Maurice, who had a soft spot in his wicked old heart for his orphan niece, was

an unlettered man, who spelt phonetically, and had a fierce abhorrence of a classical quotation. He at this time believed in the talents of Nicholas.

Certainly Charlotte's husband had an exterior most convincing of profundity, setting aside his impressive voice and scholarly language. These were outward signs of the inward grace of wisdom, and there were few so daring as to hint openly at whited sepulchres.

His appearance had been a vast gain in life to Mr. Longstaffe, who was admirably fitted to "look down" a doubting disciple.

One day, during the preliminaries of plastering and papering at the rectory, the railway station at Malham was surprised by the stranding of a goods-truck in its siding. The contents thereof, to the extent of several tons, were for Mr. Longstaffe. The singular forms and substances of various packages, though carefully

manipulated by inquiring hands, and sniffed at by perceptive noses, as well as undergoing investigations of other sorts, excited consternation in the minds of porters and of the station-master, Mr. Goby; for these are prophets who cannot survive without the honour due to omniscience in their own country.

Local railway authorities hold themselves in duty bound to nourish the curious with small-beer chronicles regarding the passengers and goods that pass by them.

The village cart which transported Mr. Longstaffe's doubtful chattels to the rectory went to and fro many times, laden with artistic treasures henceforth to be buried in the oblivion of Lakenham. A violin, a piano, and countless wooden cases of music, manuscript and otherwise, testified amply to an arduous period spent at foreign Academies when sweet sounds had been the

sirens of a young man's worship. Bales of unfinished and untouched canvases of dimensions proclaiming ambitious designs, plaster casts, lay figures, and all the paraphernalia of the plastic arts, told the tale of another unfinished chapter in Nicholas's career.

The latest caper the parson had cut had been at the expense of the tragic muse. The maid had not smiled at the bold assault of her wooer, whose five-act tragedy the public had declined to accept as an original work of genius.

A disconsolate manager who had been prevailed upon to mount elaborately the tale of love and death, now stood abashed with the finger of scorn pointed at his judgment. Yet he still asseverated privately to his commiserating friends.

"There really are some striking points in that play; and, mark my words, Nicholas Longstaffe will astonish the world yet."

This dictum Sir Maurice Godbold received with the lowly faith of an understanding ignorant of the component elements of genius. His own dramatic tastes were not in the direction of tragedy leaning towards burlesque and silk tights.

Flatshire, you must know, is a county remote from the busy hum of men. There are no great commercial towns on its level plains, and agriculture holds a leisurely sway in the vast fields which lie between its market centres. It is thinly populated, and not a county widely famed for the intelligence of its natives. Its imperturbable conservatism was in no way offended or afflicted by the introduction of the alien.

From the beginning Mr. Longstaffe appeared quite willing that his ministry should be inactive towards backsliders, and innocuous to the worst of sinners. He was no stirrer up of strife. He proclaimed no deterrent consequences, and his principles

did not assert themselves in any marked enthusiasms. Beyond the weekly Sunday services at church, the administering of sacraments, and performing of burial and marriage rites, he gave no evidence of zeal. It had decidedly not eaten him up in this direction. His luminous mind comfortably hid its light for awhile under the bushel of a stolid rural indifference.

This county had certainly made no extradition treaty with the rest of the world. The bumpkins read only local papers, and were ignorant of higher cultures. Thus the crimes of failure laid to Mr. Longstaffe's charge under the foreign jurisdiction of art and literature was never made known to them.

The new parson admirably suited the temper of Lakenham, and his flock never accused him of any earnest enthusiasm to amend their ways. Churchwardens, recalcitrant to condemnation, had no fear of

kicking against the pricks of Mr. Longstaffe's Christianity.

Sooth to say, our reverend friend's vanity did not lie in the direction of clerical fame. The field here was too small, and he had not the remotest chance of becoming a bishop, or even an archdeacon. Graceless zealots might fight for forms of faith, but they must be naturally incapable of wider flights or have a very certain hope of worldly advancement.

In the beginning of her married life the luckless Charlotte, dazzled by the aureola of her divinity's accomplishments, did not see any clay in the feet. By-and-by, when she made discovery of imperfect moral principles, in her trepidation she let down the hem of wifely duties, and forbore to make close investigation of the groundwork of his being. In having called him to account for certain perversities of disposition, she discovered she had erred, and wisely

retraced her steps. After her little lights she was a dutiful helpmeet during the days of her adversity, though she observed that the lofty sentiments emanating from her spouse found no echo in any actions of kindliness or toleration towards her own errors. Yet though the rays of glory were diminished with regard to Nicholas's moral sublimity, she still devoutly believed in his genius, and tolerated the irritability she regarded as an inseparable constituent of extraordinary faculties. This ordinary little creature, a woman without any exalted notions, vague yearnings, or sentimental inspirations, otherwise self-inflations, found by degrees her consolation in her children. The crosses and vexations laid upon her by Nicholas certainly brought out the best that was in her. At no subsequent period of her history shall I be able to portray this poor Charlotte so favourably to view. Indeed, those who look in these pages for a

record of unblemished hero or heroine may as well shut up the book at once.

In the course of nine years Mrs. Longstaffe bore her husband four children; she also attended diligently to shirt-buttons, socks, and domestic economy, matters to which she had served no apprenticeship in youth.

In the third year of her married life the hard lines of the cookery-book were relaxed. When Sir Maurice Godbold died, of an apoplectic seizure, as Godbolds mostly did, and was buried with much pomp and pride at Godbold Park, Mrs. Longstaffe, to her surprise, received a lawyer's letter, and found herself the possessor of five thousand pounds. This money was well invested, and fixed inalienably upon herself and children after her, a slur on Nicholas's prudence or probity which he never forgave. As will be seen subsequently, the name Maurice did not recommend itself to his ears.

Mary Ann Allnut, the undisciplined

kitchen wench who ruled the rectory roast, subject to the cookery-book, was relegated to the nursery platform after the legacy, and an able-bodied and quicker-handed cook, engaged in Bedmondstone, reigned more satisfactorily in her stead.

Mary Ann Allnut, whose patronymic, by some singular freak of custom, was invariably tacked on to her Christian names, was gifted with a Flatshire undulation of voice. Her sing-song speech was not pleasing to the unaccustomed ear, neither was her grammar or phraseology what it might have become subject to the curriculum of a modern Board School.

This was a matter frequently animadverted upon by Nicholas; but Mrs. Longstaffe, not being high-minded, was disposed to overlook provincial drawbacks and a capacity for breaking china, in consideration of an absolute devotion to the baby; for there was then a noisy infant which re-

quired much attention. And before all things the scholar in the study downstairs must not be reminded of his family.

Uncle Maurice, though he had no faith in the business-like capabilities of Charlotte's husband, had died still believing that the pastor of Lakenham would eventually achieve greatness, or have it thrust upon him by a repentant world. He pinned his faith latterly to the literary work on which Nicholas was at that time engaged, a work supposed to be of transcendental nature, having reference to the "Goal of Progress." Mr. Longstaffe always pronounced progress with a capital P.

When this gentleman spoke occasionally in prophetic tones of the rocks ahead of the world's Progress, Charlotte, perhaps awakened out of well-earned slumbers by the midnight entry of the cadaverous student, would shudder an uncomprehending apprehension of a terrible doom for the obstruc-

tionists. A vague fear that she might be a sinner in this direction sometimes assailed her.

Naturally the money left to Charlotte was an agreeable assistance on the road to Progress. It enabled the rector to put to the proof the merits of his profound work. If I may venture to speak with irreverence of his method, the author concluded the mighty task with a hop, skip, and a jump, bringing out the book at his own expense —otherwise at his wife's.

An unconverted public did not seize upon the great work with the eagerness expected of it. Hostile critics rose up to maul and mock it with inconsiderate cruelty. Day by day the author, as he sat in his study unfolding daily and weekly papers, paled with fear and burned with wrath. Mr. Longstaffe's book was according to one, "a work absolutely destitute of any trace of originality or

talent, audaciously setting forth long exploded fallacies, with a curious short-sightedness on the part of a writer professing to walk before the times."

Another adverse pen took up the same tune, with variations.

"The unwise and presumptuous gentleman who has recently undertaken to point out to an ignorant world the 'goal of Progress,' has injudiciously fed himself on the husks of scientific facts. We are sorry to think he has fevered himself in vain over the study of error. His work is destitute of interest or value, except as a monument whereon are recorded the delusive arguments of bygone authorities. We fail to see the final point of victory pointed out to us, and recommend to the notice of this ambitious writer a few scientific primers before he again takes aim at originality. The assimilation of trivial facts with the wild speculations

he has adopted bring us no nearer any truth. After toiling laboriously through his ponderous tomes, we do not precisely see where the goal is fixed. We recommend the author to seek popularity and literary renown in the arena of fictional narrative, for he may rest well assured that his embroidery of facts will be acceptable only at circulating libraries, to minds already diseased by romance."

It was before these sad blows to his self-love occurred that Medea and Apollo Longstaffe were introduced to the stage of life. Indeed, the advent of a third baby was daily expected at the period of the downfall of the book.

CHAPTER II.

INHERITANCE OF FAME.

When the first-born of the Longstaffe brood had wailed out its objections to the light of two cheap composites, Nicholas had been engaged in the study below his wife's chamber on a translation of Euripides. He really was a fair classical scholar, only the moderate glory of such did not avail to content him.

The infant's faint cry arrested his pen at the first page of Medea's history. When he was subsequently called upstairs by the matron in charge to consider the puling evidence of his paternity, a dull gleam of pleasure might have been observed in his

pale eyes. Charlotte did notice this expression with some surprise as he approached the cradle. He had expressed no exuberant joy beforehand.

"What do you think of her, Nicholas? Nurse says she has your features. Her hair is long and dark, too," she said faintly, with a weak wish of giving him satisfaction.

Poor infant! If it was true, it promised no fair share of attractiveness to your lot. Nicholas was bending his solemn brows with stern determination over the babe. Charlotte directed a timid glance of disapproval towards the candle, held in an awkward proximity to the face of the blinking child. There was no tenderness whatever displayed in the method of this investigation; rather, it seemed the gaze of a soothsayer, auguring signs to his purpose. If Nicholas hoped to make anything out of the red folds and many puckers of this

infantile physiognomy, he was full of faith. The mother, thinking there was something amiss, signed to the nurse to approach the cradle. So far, Nicholas had not had much acquaintance with children of tender age. Baptisms in the first year of his clerical life were still a novelty, and he was awkward in managing long clothes and bald heads. The Flatshire matrons of the district were not addicted to the customs of radical unprincipled city ladies who persistently produce a baby every year. They were as leisurely and conservative in this matter as in others less prejudicial to the nation.

The heart of Mr. Longstaffe was not moved to any fatherly pity by the gaspings and wailings of his child. Little eyes winking beneath the light of the detestable composite, did not hurry his proceedings. Rather he seemed to rejoice in these proceedings, which manifested life and observation.

"A girl, is it, Mrs. Moggs? It seems a highly emotional animal for its time of life."

Naturally a baby is "it" to its paternal parent for some period of time. The neuter pronoun was no injury, but the stigma "animal" sorely wounded the mother's unscientific sensibilities. When the outraged nurse, obedient to Mrs. Longstaffe's sign, lifted the baby out of the cradle, and the candle was set in safety on a table, Charlotte breathed more freely. Then Nicholas relieved his mind of the weight of his lengthy cogitations. Stiffening his long back, he looked straight over the pillows.

"I am glad it is a girl, my love. I shall call it Medea."

Charlotte was at this time happily ignorant of the doubtful character of the lady specified. The atrocious crimes attributed to the great enchantress, and

the tale of her retributive love, were things remaining for a later discovery. Yet to her simple mind it hardly sounded a name familiar enough to bless its possessor.

"What a very uncommon name, Nicholas. Medea! Who was she? I don't remember any mention of her in Mangnall's 'Questions.' I hope she was a good woman."

Thus, though the heroine's scandalous notoriety was not clear to her, you perceive this young mother had her doubts. And though Mangnall was the sum total of her biographical lore, Mrs. Charlotte, like all people slow to learn, had a retentive memory. It seemed likely, if Medea had been a worthy or exemplary person, Mangnall would have recorded her fame and eulogized her virtues.

The newly made father would not meet the gaze of the languid blue eyes fixed on his resolved countenance with so much

mute entreaty. He looked steadfastly at a highly ornamental bead watch-pocket fixed to the back of the bed. This work of art had been the gift of Charlotte's aunt, Miss Dorothea Godbold, and was treasured as a memento of a home where Charlotte had spent much of her girlhood.

To a man of Nicholas's breadth of mind Mangnall was naturally beneath contempt.

"Medea was the name of a great woman, deeply versed in the science of her times. They called it magic in those days. In consequence of her exalted attainments she was greatly maligned by her contemporaries; in fact, they left her no character to speak of. At present I am engaged on the study of her achievements, and am overcome anew with wonder at her profound wisdom. Possibilities are infinite, and there is no reason why *my* child should not prove the possessor of a more than

ordinary intelligence." Nicholas lowered his eyelids cautiously and coughed gently, as if in fair deference to himself, as he went on, "The heritage of fame may fall to her lot, and it is not my intention to hamper her with a commonplace name. A name is an inspiration. I have fully decided the child shall be called Medea."

Then he gave the infant a parental thrust with a lean forefinger, and promptly departed to prosecute his Greek translations.

The utterance given vent to in this oracular style was as good as Greek to Mrs. Longstaffe's simple understanding. She had ceased to admire or trust the unintelligible jargon of her husband. She only gathered now that Nicholas was resolute, and, being too weak for argument, she yielded the matter in silence, only shedding a few quiet tears over the face of her luckless baby on the day of its christening. On this occasion Mary Ann

Allnut proved herself a sorry comforter to the distressed mother.

"*My* mother, she uster say to me that it wore a pore look-out it wore if a babby didn't argufy a bit with the parson over the baptising. If the devil he taistes the chutch water, as in course he should, the babby sets up a blarin' when he's druv' out. The old gentleman don't care to squench his thust with that holy liquor. An', missis, there warn't so much as a winnicky cry from this 'ere babby to say as Satan wore riled with maister's good work. You may depend on it, *he* warn't beat out wi' such weak cusses and conjurings. I'm affeard maister he ain't no dapster yet at flabbergasting old Belzebub. You see, his heart ain't in the business."

There was no scandal in the parish concerning this baby's outlandish name. Beyond the doctor, whose recollections were hazy, there were none in Lakenham

church acquainted with classical literature. For all that this congregation knew, Medea might have been a canonized saint.

When baby number two made an appearance Charlotte prepared herself to do battle in the most praiseworthy manner. Her weak little heart palpitated wildly over the uncongenial task.

"I should like to call this baby after poor Uncle Maurice," she said in a weak quaver at her first interview with her husband. This was immediately after the little fortune had been left to her, and Charlotte was becomingly grateful for the removal of domestic cares.

Nicholas flickered his pale eyes with an unsteady movement, which might have been construed by the imaginative in two erroneous ways. Some would have said it signified a want of decision, but the more believing faction would have attributed the wavering motion to the fitful gleams of

intellectual fire. It is hardly necessary to assure you, my friends, that neither speculation would have hit the mark.

"Maurice, did you say, my love?" Then Mr. Longstaffe paused as if to give emphasis to what was to follow. Meanwhile he was thinking of the defunct Godbold uncle's absolutely tied-up legacy. His heart hardened.

"Yes, Nicholas," she answered, flushing a little; "after poor Uncle Maurice, to whom we owe so much."

The debts of gratitude were never a millstone round the neck of Nicholas, for in his opinion none of his deservings had met with a just reward. He had long ago cancelled any indentures of thankfulness between himself and the world or his Maker. At his wife's reference to their improved circumstances, a superior smile was the only token that he had heard her words.

"Maurice de Saxe was taught reading and writing with the utmost difficulty. He was brave, according to report; but courage, as I have frequently explained to you, is a mere animal instinct." Nicholas had once run away from an exasperated bull, leaving his wife exposed to the peril of a charge in the middle of a field, and was thenceforth very contemptuous of personal bravery in others. "He was, moreover, much addicted to affairs of gallantry and a slave to rash impulses. Your Uncle Maurice in most ways resembled him—notable in his intellectual disabilities and animal instincts. Can you cite any other distinguished character of that name? No, my love, I cannot agree to it. It is only fair to start this child in life with a variety of chances at his disposal. There is no need to enter into any discussion, since I have fully resolved to call the baby Apollo."

Whereupon Mrs. Longstaffe lifted up her voice and wept hysterically in concert with her child. Nicholas, unguardedly meeting the nurse's eye, quailed before the unmistakable wrath he saw there, and promptly took his departure. It was very clear that Maugnall had admitted the fame of a heathen deity to its pages.

On the doctor's next visit he was informed of the matter. He took upon himself to remonstrate angrily with the rector as being answerable for the weak condition of his sorrowful patient. Nicholas only shifted his expressionless eyes up and down his bookshelves, without making any defence.

"Will you let her call her baby as she likes? Man alive, can't you see a woman deserves some little compensations for all the trouble of them?" shouted the doctor in his fury at the apathy of his antagonist. He got up angry and out of breath, with

his little eyes blazing, after ten minutes' vain parleying. The granite-like texture of Nicholas's will was made apparent to him at last.

"My dear Doctor Morgan, you will do yourself an injury. Pray take this unimportant matter more calmly. There's really no necessity to concern yourself about Charlotte's weak fancies. We've time to consider the thing. It was a premature suggestion on my part, and my wife is too hasty in her conclusions."

That was the only satisfaction the doctor received for his friendly intervention.

"Weak fancies!" he repeated angrily more than once as he strode across Lakenham Green. "Was ever a poor woman so sat upon?"

The infant in question was, on the following Sunday, during its mother's afternoon nap, and while Dr. Morgan, unsuspecting of mischief, indulged in a quiet

pipe in his back garden, smuggled into the church and made one of the fold as a son of Jupiter.

To Mary Ann Allnut's unbounded satisfaction—for she was the innocent abettor of the parson's surreptitious christening,—the baby howled lustily over the exorcism of original sin.

On the third occasion of a baby Charlotte was resigned to any extraordinary name her husband might choose. It was about the epoch of his literary failure, and she believed him to be at this time smarting beneath the lash of ridicule and contumely. She would not, therefore, have crossed Nicholas in any extravagant proposition.

To her surprise he delayed hinting at any christening ceremony.

This was a very good baby, and no sounds appeared to disturb its slumbers—"a model of a baby," as Mrs. Moggs declared, having no need to resort to soothing

doses. But the doctor gave it very close attention, and Charlotte, thinking something was amiss, clung to it with a fond affection.

One sunny afternoon in early June the mother was lying on her sofa near the window, lazily speculating whether Medea's frocks of last summer could be made to do service for Apollo this season. To her surprise, Nicholas so far departed from his custom as to walk into her room with a musty volume tucked under his arm. Charlotte, in a pale blue dressing-gown, which matched her clear eyes, looked almost pretty. The new baby, with the same blue eyes, lay awake, but quite still, across her knee.

After a few remarks had been exchanged the conversation languished. Nicholas proceeded to open his book and began to read. Mrs. Longstaffe sat in silence watching the manœuvres of building swallows, whose

rapid masonry went on under the eaves above her window.

Ovid's Metamorphoses did not absolutely absorb the father's attention, for he glanced from time to time at the baby, so still, though wide awake.

"Shall I read to you, Charlotte?"

She started. A girlish blush spread over her face. When he called her Charlotte her thoughts went back to other days when romantic dreams of a happy union had filled her ignorant mind. In the more intimate life of matrimonial indifference she was invariably "my love" or "my dear." Long ago he used to read poetry to her—blank verse usually—unintelligible enough, of course, but she had listened with strained ears then for the pompous utterances, blaming her own dullness for not comprehending. She had then deemed herself highly favoured by the patronage of such a paragon of wisdom, a lover who

would not improbably set the Thames on fire some day.

"If you like, Nicholas—if it is something I can understand. The baby is very good; she will not cry."

Nicholas had glanced doubtfully towards the white bundle. However, partially reassured by the mother's half-resentful assertion, he opened his book, and after a preliminary fluttering of pages, fixed on a suitable story in apparently an unconsidered way.

Making a free translation as he went on, Mr. Longstaffe proceeded to relate the story of Philomela, amending a little perchance. It is difficult to say how it was, but on this occasion, perhaps lowering his standard to meet the comprehension of one who was simple-minded, he made use of language intelligible enough to enchain the attention of his auditor. Charlotte even followed the tragic tale with an

appearance of interest. For had not the nightingales been singing in the garden below her window through the long watches of the night when this little baby was born? To her it seemed that she would never again hear a nightingale without recalling the advent of this blue-eyed baby. The calendar of a mother's heart is marked by strange influences.

"So the poor thing was changed into a nightingale?" said Charlotte at the end of the tale, glancing at her husband with a child's bright-eyed interest, forgetting haply for the moment that he was her husband. "Philomela! That is a pretty name," she said heedlessly.

"Do you really think so, Charlotte?" said Nicholas, with unwonted cordiality, as he shut up the volume. "I am glad you agree with me for once. I intend to call the baby Philomela. She may be musical. Who can tell?"

Ah! who, indeed, could tell, Nicholas, that your baby daughter would never hear sweet sounds?

The unlucky wife saw in a moment where her tongue had slipped.

She sighed heavily. Oh for an honest everyday Christian name! A Susan, a Mary, or even a Sarah, would be preferable to her to such outlandish titles to distinction. Yet this was not such an aggravated case of misfortune as Medea's. Philomela's prototype was comparatively respectable. The scandalous notoriety of the other lady Mrs. Longstaffe had long ago sought out in a classical dictionary.

Ah me! it was a sad day when the little Philomela, who was expected to make sweet music in her home, was found to be for ever voiceless.

Though she waxed strong and restless as the other children, she proved to be deaf and dumb. The anguished mother, think-

ing of those nightingales which, with happy music, had heralded her baby only a year ago in the month of May, was sorely afflicted. In the heaviness of her despair and grief the veil was rent from the secret shrine of wifehood. She made her revelations in all unconsciousness to the doctor. Her childish blue eyes fixed on him with cruel reproach.

"If she had never been born it would have been better. Oh, doctor, doctor, why did God let her live, to give me so much misery? And Nicholas does not care; he has no pity for me in any trouble. He is wrapped up in books. I must bear everything alone. Why did I let him give her that name? He said she would be musical, that she would sing. God is cruel; He gives every bird a voice, and my little baby none—none."

Little Philomela, just able to toddle, had eyes as blue as the forget-me-not flowers at

the window, flowers which her chubby hands in mischief uprooted daily. She came, with rapturous coos and chuckles over her own unfettered action, to stare at her weeping mother. The compassionate doctor, who had broken the grievous intelligence, took up the child and placed her on Charlotte's knee.

Though words failed him, she understood his meaning when the short fat arms were stretched out to clasp her neck.

"Oh, my treasure, my precious one, what a wicked woman your mother is! God might hear her, and take your sweet life even now. My baby, my blessed lamb, who will never hear my voice, you shall always be to me something more than the rest." So the full heart found best relief in a vow of maternal devotion.

Nicholas had refused point-blank to tell Charlotte of this matter when the doctor had privately informed him that his last

lingering doubt or hope concerning the child's hearing was removed. The doubt had been entertained by the doctor for months before he dared to speak of it.

The rector had a truly selfish man's dread of emotion. His desire was to be apart from irritating or disturbing influences. The many everyday worries which beset his little wife were never to be revealed to him. It was no part of his principle to share the burden of matrimonial cares. When the yoke of domesticity was painful it behoved Charlotte to carry it by herself. He attended chiefly and carefully to his own interest and comfort. You will find it is not an unusual form of manly labour.

Four years waxed and waned, and Philomela was still the baby. Matrons well qualified to decide such occult mysteries were sure that nursery cares at the rectory were at an end.

Mr. Longstaffe had finally abandoned literature after the miscarriage of his great work. He took up a practical pursuit, and forsook the fine arts. He was following the path of horticulture with great ardour, at the cost of new dresses to Charlotte and sea-side trips for the children, when a final check was put upon his projects. Regardless of expense, he had erected two greenhouses with the costliest adjuncts of heating apparatus. This of course set him in the way of inventing appliances of his own, and he was considering taking out a patent for a novel sort of garden-squirt, when a cold finger was laid upon him, and bade him cease his labours.

The study was at that epoch littered with expensive botanical publications. Cartloads of curious shrubs came from various nursery gardens, and languished and pined beneath the adverse east winds of Flatshire. There was no end to his

excellent devices to secure a successful result. He hybridized and fertilized in vain. Nothing extraordinary or novel came of it all. Tibbs, the former factotum at the rectory, was forbidden, under pain of dismissal, to lend any assistance in the house in the way of knife or boot cleaning.

The grand Scotch gardener, newly imported, having botanical terms at his finger ends, would have held his situation as derogatory to his dignity without a subordinate absolutely at his disposal. He complained to Mr. Longstaffe that Tibbs was a very inferior article, elderly and ignorant; but still Tibbs was vastly industrious, and did all the hard work cheerfully, therefore he was suffered to remain.

When in the midst of this enthusiasm the doctor's services were again in request at the rectory, as a matter of course the new baby was called Flora. Rather more

than a year after this young lady's appearance, when Medea was about ten, lank and toothless Nicholas took a severe cold and became seriously indisposed. The too frequent changes of atmosphere from the elysium of his orchid-house to the damp influences of the outside world, was the original cause of this misfortune. The cold settled with great persistency in some internal locality, and after a protracted period of peevishness on his part, and long-suffering solicitude on the side of Charlotte, the rector took his departure one foggy morning, for another and a better world, where he confidently anticipated a reward for his many arduous labours and difficult undertakings. No Christian ever died more satisfactorily to beholders—that is to say, with a more sure and certain hope of salvation.

CHAPTER III.

MONUMENTAL GLORY.

THE children of the Rev. Nicholas considered themselves the outraged heirs of fame. They held their baptism to have been a dire offence, a calamity never sufficiently to be bewailed, frowning disapproval upon all references to their reception into the Church.

Though Medea, Apollo, Philomela, and Flora were names stripped of suggestive meaning, and curtailed of every shadow of classical glory when abbreviated into almost everyday titles of Medie, Polly, Phil, and Floss, yet any ignorant stranger venturing to inquire the derivations of

their more familiar contractions, was banned with a veto of disapproval.

Mrs. Longstaffe had from the beginning of her motherhood suffered an uneasy dread that her offspring might do honour to the foresight of their paternal parent. They were scarcely out of swaddling clothes before she experienced qualms over some faint evidence of nascent intelligence. With a mother's logic, she construed infantile chuckles and inarticulate speech as the efforts of precocious will over physical disabilities.

But for Mary Ann Allnut's practical suggestion—"'Deed, mam, and the babby has got the gripes," — this lady might have interpreted Medea's early groans and convulsive struggles to signify sibylline prophecies. Why was she, she had silently argued, to be condemned to give heroic and remarkable characters to the world? She had never heard of much happiness coming

to those people who turned things upside down. She would much rather have her boys and girls grow up after an established, if prosaic, form of goodness; after the accepted notion of respectability, as ordinary men and women who would fulfil their allotted term of days in a fixed orbit. Why should they mark out new lines of merit, of original thought or action, to set the world by the ears?

But none of her children, she now admitted, had given cause for her maternal solicitude after their irresponsible babyhood, except Medea, who proved an irreconcilable to her mother's yearnings for commonplace offspring as soon as she began to lisp opinions and queries. Her aptitude for reading and writing was only comfortably balanced by her naughty rebellious spirit, which proved her no angelic changeling. Apollo's inherent turpitude and his slow mastery of the

rudiments of learning were balm to Mrs. Longstaffe's fears. She was of opinion that her cup of endurance would have been full had her chubby-faced lad turned out as replete with capabilities and accomplishments as his father. As things were, it did not seem likely that his destiny of fame would be fulfilled.

After a decent period of mourning had elapsed, sufficiently long for a monument to the late rector to be talked of, and for the crape on Mrs. Longstaffe's gown to have become somewhat frayed, the new rector intimated that he was ready to take possession of his house, and the widow understood she was expected to move.

Hitherto a neighbouring clergyman had officiated as Mr. Pilkington's deputy, coming over every Sunday for the services and partaking of sandwiches between times in the clerk's cottage. Six months had

only in a measure mitigated the strength of Mrs. Longstaffe's remorseful grief. Her Nicholas was now beyond wounding her susceptibilities. She had, therefore, embalmed his memory in surprising virtues. No after-taste of bitterness lingered in her thoughts or speech concerning him. She forgot his strenuous idleness, and the distracting theories which had made her early married life so burdensome. She forgave him the embitterment of her maternity. At present she maintained the blessedness of their union, rebutting fiercely any hint that he had not been a companionable partner. As a matter of course, she was now sure she had not been a dutiful wife.

The polite intimation to quit from the new rector quickened her remorse and compunctions. Her appreciation of the rectory, and her blessed lot as the partner of Nicholas, had not been sufficiently great. Her gratitude to Heaven had been inade-

quate for the bounteous grace accorded to her. Now she was about to be driven an outcast into a cruel world where she would not have a roof to call her own! Mr. Pilkington might surely have been more considerate of her feelings and defenceless position.

In point of fact this gentleman had been unusually deferential towards the widow in suffering her to occupy for nearly six months unmolested the abode that, of right, belonged to his office. He had even taken the costly greenhouses and superfluous furniture off her hands at a generous sum, consenting also to the continued employment of Tibbs and the maintenance of certain old pensioners who swept the rectory lawn. Mr. Pilkington had certainly not pressed his authority on the widow in any obnoxious way, being yet a young man and not having acquired any insolence of spiritual office.

It, however, in some vague way gratified Mrs. Longstaffe to regard him as her enemy. She greedily listened for Mr. Toovey's and other jovially minded farmers' premonitory growls concerning the parson's innovations. It sounded like an echo of fealty to their late pastor and gave confirmation to Mrs. Longstaffe's trembling uncertainty concerning her husband's merits. It was evident that as a public man his services had been highly esteemed.

This went some way towards convincing her of his domestic virtues. As for Mr. Pilkington, his fame had preceded him. He was known to be rigidly ascetic, one of a new school which practised what it preached —a foolish deviation from precedent.

Lakenham was resolved to enter a protest against the cure of its souls, if religion was to be administered after any liberal or uncomfortable fashion. It preferred homeopathic doses.

It was about this time that a new monument made its appearance in the church, greatly exalting the hearts of those who had contributed towards its erection.

The venerating Jack Young, who gave a mason eighteenpence to carve on a nameless and unhonoured gravestone "O rare Ben Jonson," had probably no after-thought that this deed of reverence would perpetuate his own name while recording a greater. But the creator of the astounding work of art at Lakenham considered that he had amply vindicated his right to take superior rank as an artist in recording the rector's fame. The stonemason or sculptor who had executed it, Jerry Styles by name, was reckoned by local authorities to be a distinguished worker in the carving and decorating line. He painted signboards of extraordinary merit, adorned tavern walls with frescoes of bacchanalian orgies, and in less convivial seasons of repentance

was deemed worthy to record the virtues of departed sages, of the good, the brave, the young, and the fair, on mural tablets or gravestones. Sometimes a graphic portrait of some Flatshire worthy would be taken in exchange for his board and lodging. The neighbourhood of Lakenham was full of the evidence of Jerry Styles's talent. Though evil stars of indolence and drunkenness frowned upon his efforts to conquer fame, he managed to maintain an eye and hand efficient enough to gain him a living. The work of magnifying the Reverend Nicholas's name was entrusted to him without demur by subscribers to the "munniment." According to local judgment he achieved a remarkable success. Certainly to an unprejudiced onlooker the rector's fame appeared to be somewhat unduly weighted with the piles of marble books, as well as by musical and more indefinite scientific instruments; moreover, the ap-

proving angelic host, sitting up aloft with no accurate perceptions of gravity, toppled very inelegantly over the uppermost clouds.

But these were mere trifles, not in any way interfering with the splendid conception of the whole.

The artist's work was supremely well calculated to attract a stranger's attention to the inscription below. The secret of this composition was never divulged. In committee, the many farmers and few tradesmen of the parish had subscribed for a flourishing epitaph in choice Latin, over and beyond the "munniment."

The secretary of the body, who happened to be a retired gasfitter, and a man still referred to as of illuminating notions, had been the agent of its production.

"He wur a scholard. It's proper-like he mus' have larning in the lines," had stipulated Mr. Parsons, of Furness Hill Farm. Nobody objected.

The Poet Laureate and a Regius Professor were implicated in its composition by Mr. Toovey's son, a pedantic sprig apprenticed to a bookseller in Bedmondstone, and anxious to give evidence of a familiar acquaintance with the profession of literature and learning. Enough was that all were satisfied with their money's worth—such a strangely unusual event in the annals of a public subscription, that it is worthy of record.

It is not, however, to be inferred that progress had so far advanced in rural Lakenham as to qualify its parishioners to make the freest translation from Latin text. The fact was, the worthy doctor had been called upon to venture further afield than the prescribing of drugs. As he, with many pauses, propitiating the patience of a stolid audience with much coughing and an occasional search of the ceiling for light, translated the general import of the in-

scription, he gave ample opportunity for the digesting of the notable composition. Each slowly grasping, bucolic mind had time to seize some flowery period, and so at least to carry home one laudatory adjective, which in Latin, of course, was of double value.

"By gom! Lakenham is nut gettin' a poor penn'orth! But the parson he desarved good warses. He nuvver tarned things topsitivvy, makin' a rumpus 'bout chutch-goin', or a fellar bein' a bit muggy at times. Where's the harm? In coas we're thusty o' market-day. An', dang it, if the new parson, the young jackanips, thinks as Jonathan Toovey 'ull stomack inquirations 'bout his bank account in kingdom come, Jonathan Toovey 'ull carry his books to chapel."

There followed an East Anglian succession of guffaws, rising and falling in various untuneful keys. This Nestor of

the committee who thus passed his approval on the epitaph took this occasion to intimate, in full conclave, his stern resolve to resist the persuasions of the new parson to more sober ways. Mr. Pilkington's sermon on the previous Sunday had taken for its text, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It had given great offence to a congregation with virtue established, considering it needed no repentance.

The Reverend Nicholas had admirably suited the temper of his flock in the steadily pursued policy of letting alone. This was adequately proved by a readiness to give guinea testimonials of appreciation.

The humbler dwellers in Lakenham who came to criticise the much-talked-of monument, non-subscribers these, who had never tasted a drop of the least intoxicating Pierian spring, were satisfied to admire

the huge capital letters and embellishing flourishes, full of faith that such a multitude of signs must signify something meritorious. The tablet certainly gave evidence of virtues never observed in Mr. Longstaffe's family circle. Ah me! such inscriptions cover a legion of sins often enough. The catalogue of virtues concluded by asserting Nicholas to have been a scholar of renown, artist and poet, a gentleman of unblemished charity, a loving pastor and fond parent. This history has nothing to do with these fictions of poetic license, except wherein they influenced Medea's imagination and fired her ambition. To her this apocryphal testimony, steadfastly believed, hallowed the hopes of her dead parent, stirring in her juvenile mind the genius of effort, which shows clearly that false records may point a way to strong, if not good, effects.

It was some time before any plan of

living definitely suggested itself to Mrs. Longstaffe's mind. In the first few months of her widowhood, the doctor, who was her only adviser, shrank from making suggestions. There was no actual reason why Charlotte should migrate elsewhere, and as the weeks rolled on such a course of action appeared to her friend and counsellor less and less to be recommended. Her own kinsfolk stood afar off from her on the other side of the county betraying no concern in her forlorn situation. Uncle Maurice excepted, all her connections had passed her by, as a poor relation of no importance or interest. She had been the only child of the family scapegrace, and Heaven alone knew who her mother was. Fortunately, the nameless lady had died in Charlotte's infancy. It is true that Aunt Dorothea Godbold, half-sister to Sir Maurice had showed great kindness to the neglected child, and, after her marriage, had con-

tinued annually to send a formal invitation to Hangerfield. But Nicholas, seeing no profit to be got out of this visit, declined to put himself out of the way by accepting, and Charlotte, hampered by housekeeping and babies, had made no effort to obtain a temporary release. In the course of nine years naturally the notes of invitation were discontinued, and all connection with the eccentric old lady was cut off. Upon Mr. Longstaffe's death, Aunt Dorothea once more opened communication, sending a long letter of condolence, which read rather more like one of congratulation. The counsel and numerous inquiries therein contained were not acceptable to the widow. Charlotte resented much sound advice, or perhaps it was the slur cast on Nicholas which caused such painful smarting. Miss Dorothea was not known to be particularly merciful in her judgments.

The aggrieved wife hastily thrust the slander out of sight, and never answered it. Years afterwards she found this letter in the drawer of her desk, and reading it once more, with mitigated remorse for her shortcomings as a wife, found between the lines of condemnation a kindly interest in her welfare and a strong desire to re-establish friendly relations. But on first receiving it Charlotte, full of fealty towards the dead husband, slammed the door on family patronage and accorded it no reply.

The indifference manifested with regard to her circumstances by most of her relations was not resented so much for herself by this fierce little woman; but, the passion of motherhood being strong in her breast, she was angered that these wealthy folks should ignore her darlings. She had no need of pecuniary assistance, thanks to dear Uncle Maurice, who had been so mer-

cifully disposed to the orphan child of his ill-behaved brother. They should all see that she could manage without their countenance. Move from Lakenham? No, never. She had spent the only happy days of her life there—oh, Mrs. Longstaffe! —and there was no earthly reason why she should go away now, and leave all her kind friends. What did Mrs. Hall say? She ought to take a house in Bedmondstone, for the sake of the children's education. Mrs. Hall was a meddling old woman. No—no, she would not have them turn out geniuses, and get brain-fever and lose their complexions by living in a stuffy street. Mrs. Longstaffe's objections were hastily strung together. They had always lived in the country, with fresh milk and eggs in abundance, and they always should have green fields to play in, and pure water to wash in. No house to let in Lakenham? Then

she would go into a cottage. She knew the blacksmith had one to let; and though she was a Godbold, no one had ever said she was proud. There was a vast accession of spirit in Mrs. Longstaffe at the time of her removal. It was whispered that it was not quite becoming in one so recently bereaved.

Current opinion went with Miss Dormer, whose little corkscrew ringlets shook dolorously over this manifestation of energy.

"A gentle resignation to the decrees of the Almighty is expected of one left in such sad circumstances. When my poor dear pa, as every one knows was suddenly taken, left me a bereaved orphan, I was like a shorn lamb. Providence mercifully tempered the wind to my helpless condition. Mrs. Longstaffe can hardly expect the Almighty to do much for her, when she stands up so boldly of herself."

Finally the doctor did say a few words

with regard to settling. Mrs. Longstaffe was very ignorant concerning the investment of her little fortune, and had to apply to her medical adviser on all business matters.

The widow was in receipt of something over three hundred a year, counting her own little fortune and a remnant of the rector's. To her this seemed an ample income on which to bring up four young children in a country district, especially as her thoughts, unlike the thoughts of other mothers, did not map out an ambitious education or career for any one of them. Her desire was that there should be no "young hopeful." Of delusive dreams of fame she had seen enough, and all but the most prosaic characters seemed to her charged with an element no less potent than the electric fluid. A pretty creeper-covered cottage on the village green, something better than the blacksmith's

modest tenement whereof she had spoken favourably, was soon enlarged by two rooms, and Mrs. Longstaffe's family transplanted to its shelter.

It was a livelier situation than her former home, which had looked on to the churchyard and schoolhouse, being also hemmed in from the vulgar gaze of rustics by belts of gloomy evergreens and an impenetrable holly hedge. Very shortly the widow began to look on life and the small affairs of her neighbours with interest. It was surprising what a zest this new familiarity with their concerns gave to her hitherto colourless existence, colourless by reason of an all-absorbent sun.

Had it not been for certain difficulties which arose in connection with Medea, Mrs. Longstaffe would have felt herself, after the installation in her new quarters, absolutely free from care.

CHAPTER IV.

A MATTER OF HEAD.

The doctor was seated in his favourite arm-chair, with a well-beloved pipe between his lips. There was a placid smile upon his face, which spoke of calm enjoyment. It was the post-prandial hour, hot and sunny, for the doctor dined in the middle of the day.

The clear ring of an emphatic young voice resounding amongst shelves of glass bottles caused the good man to turn round from the perusal of his paper. His serenity was disturbed. The placid smile faded as the *Lancet* dropped to the ground.

"Dr. Morgan, I want to go to school," said the owner of the forcible voice.

There was extraordinary evidence of discomposure on a tear-stained face as a brown head was thrust in at the open dispensary window. The unpardonable suddenness of its appearance, and the scant ceremony of the young girl's address, were well calculated to fluster a middle-aged bachelor of regular habits.

The young barbarians who lived on the other side of Lakenham Green had of late months exalted this worthy doctor to the unenviable position of counsellor and friend. He was not sufficiently philosophical to endure their flattering attentions with equanimity. Their confidence in his superior wisdom and justice might be complimentary, but had no further compensation.

The doctor now leant backwards in his chair and closed his eyes. A look of well-assumed resignation crept over his features. Medea Longstaffe had not a suspicion that

a twinkle lurked beneath his eyelids. However, she construed his passive attitude as significant of encouragement, and at once took advantage of it. She promptly climbed over the low sill, scratching fresh paint, and trampling recklessly on choice geraniums newly bedded out. When she had taken her customary seat as plaintiff on the ledge of the window, she drew her much-darned knees into the embrace of her long arms, members protruding from sleeves too short, and revealing a good deal of bony wrist. In this way she rested her chin, and studied solemnly, with large, inquiring eyes, the expression of her friend's face. She was silent so long that the doctor opened his eyes, thinking she might have departed more noiselessly than her wont. He shut them again very quickly, and prepared himself to contest the ground with his juvenile adversary.

"What's the matter with Miss Dormer

now? Your mother seems quite satisfied with the education you are receiving."

Miss Dormer was a daily governess whose services were specially retained by the genteeler residents round about Lakenham.

"Mother knows nothing about education," said Medea disrespectfully, bringing down her eyebrows in an obstinate way. Then she suddenly threw up her chin with a movement of disdain. "Miss Dormer indeed! Why, Dr. Morgan, she can't do the rule of three, and never even *heard* of Virgil's 'Georgics.' She's well enough at wool-work, and Polly thinks she can play 'The Battle of Prague' first-rate. I'm not sure about it, though there does seem a good deal of cannon. But that's no good. You know, doctor, you said I'd got a man's brain, and those aren't the things they taught YOU."

The trenchant decision of the objecting

maiden's voice caused the judge to turn in his chair. If he had not been a brave man the doctor would have groaned audibly.

How many times already had he been made to repent that unguarded remark, urged confidentially to Mrs. Longstaffe in extenuation of Medea's favourite studies. It was the treacherous Apollo who, overhearing it, had straightway carried it to Medea's ears by way of insult and reproach. In all her feminine failures she thenceforth made it her rampart of defence.

The doctor was fairly posed by the difficulties surrounding the situation. He had for weeks expected this attack, and saw a large amount of right on Medea's side.

Her intelligence being unusual, the present repressive system of training was an injury to her. At the same time, our friend was remarkably anxious to conciliate Mrs. Longstaffe.

At an early age Medea had tasted of the

tree of knowledge beneath her father's supervision. The withdrawal of the yoke of Euclid and Latin verses at his death had at first been welcomed as a relaxation, but the mental apparatus, accustomed to the tension of difficulty, soon felt the remission of work to have a dispiriting influence. After six months' holiday, on their removal to Woodbine Cottage Medea's intellectual hunger awoke like a giant refreshed with sleep, and found only the liliputian abilities of Miss Dormer to do combat with. It could not be supposed that she would long remain satisfied with the feeble mental sustenance afforded her by ladylike thoughts and accomplishments. I admit that Medea at this time was disposed towards being a prig. Her demeanour towards Apollo's inertia to learning and devotion to cricket was not pretty or sisterly.

It was shortly after her change of residence that the Encyclopedia became

Mrs. Longstaffe's bugbear. Her daughter having made discovery of its competence to supply satisfactory answers to various "whys," her dubious "buts" towards any incompetent explanations were scarcely respectful. In vain Mary Ann Allnut, at the distracted Charlotte's instigation, endeavoured to divert the direction of Medea's labours and inquiries. Initiation in culinary and domestic arts availed not. In vain she was invited to dabble in jam-making and to participate in the manufacture of puddings and cakes. No mysterious messes seduced her from her allegiance to book-lore. The washing of Polly's collars and Flossie's pinafores might be meritorious translations of dirt, but pointed to nothing more brilliant; and in the making of custards and cakes this young heroine saw no chance of extending the borders of chemistry. Coagulated eggs and milk were no sublime alchemy or scientific mystery.

Likewise the art of needlework, illustrated tastefully on a venerable sampler of a deceased aunt Godbold, was held up to Medea's honour, but failed to light a spark of emulation in the perverse maiden's breast. Finally, after a long struggle to conform her mind to the educational methods of womankind, as manifested in Lakenham, Medea made her appeal to the doctor. He had witnessed afar off the battle between Mrs. Longstaffe and her daughter without interfering. Miss Dormer's superficial accomplishments had been applied to Medea's mind for eighteen months, and she was now nearly twelve years old when she ventured to take her fate into her own hands.

Dr. Morgan had only very gradually learnt, for he was not a man of rapid intuitions, that he would probably have to deal with a vexatious problem if he concerned himself with Medea's education. Being an

old-fashioned thinker, he did not admire female prodigies of learning, and had he consulted the matter of individual taste, he would gladly have seconded Mrs. Longstaffe's endeavours to repress her daughter's budding instincts. Still, he was aware that the world was beginning to entertain wider views concerning female education. Woman's sphere was no longer contracted to the fulfilment of housewifely duties. Had not his own sister allied herself with modern progress, and did not the learned German professor she had honoured with her hand blazon abroad the might of feminine intelligences? Yet these facts did not alter our good doctor's natural sentiments of aversion to blue-stockings. His ideal woman was, as she ever had been, soft and yielding, weak-minded, and, it might be, prone to tears, but with no conceptions of algebra, political economy, or metaphysics. However, happily for Medea, he was a man

of steady principles, strictly just in all his dealings. This middle-aged country practitioner, to all appearance made of most ordinary clay, looked steadily at his duties whatever they might be. He would not even take advantage of a child of Medea's years, and he was rigidly fair in all his judgments.

In this instance his behaviour towards a rebellious child was the more praiseworthy, because his policy was at the time one of conciliation towards her mother. Certainly, he might have established his hopes and position more promptly and securely by acting the part of an unjust judge. But there was such undeniable evidence of Medea's capacity, and he could not shut his eyes to the fact that her young mind was straining ardently to reach a satisfactory fountain of knowledge. He had been acquainted with her constitution from babyhood, and the present aspect of

the pale-faced, lanky-limbed child troubled his mind with vague fears. There were moments when he was angry with her for her quick feelings and sensitive brain. Certainly Charlotte was not to blame for this constitution.

The memory of her father, dead now two years, was, in Medea's mind, invested with a cloud of glory, of indefinite colour truly, but nevertheless of luminous material. He had been vastly clever, it was agreed. His autocratic nods and Jovian thunders, fulminating towards noisy or fretful children, were the definitely dark spots on the vagueness of his virtues and genius. But, of course, it is a privilege of great men to have moods, and Medea recalled gladly the records of familiar dæmons inseparable from mighty intellects.

Though this worshipping young heroine, to her sorrow, could never clearly bring back any wise utterances of her deceased

parent, or lay hold of visible laurels, still she distinctly remembered trembling in her shoes before his frown, and construing Latin verses at an early age with the sad accompaniment of tears.

You perceive that her venerating powers were excessive, and not by any means subject to reason. Methinks Medea, in spite of her intellectual bent, was feminine at the core. At this epoch she was quite as much trouble to herself as to others. With her rudimentary corners there seemed no place in her world to fit her. No one cared for the things she cared for. As her memory of persecutions and troubles far off became feebler she treasured with more faithful, filial reverence the conviction of her father's incomparable attainments. I admit that her faith in his wisdom received a shock when she made the discovery that her name was due to his prescient fancy. But in the course of time she drew con-

solation even from this matter. Apollo never at any later period consented to perceive discernment manifested in a title which made him the butt of schoolboy witticisms and the target for subalterns' satire.

It was after Medea had sternly taken her mother to task for her baptism that the little widow, bursting into passionate tears, had bewailed her own powerless wifehood. Unsealing the past with many hysterical sobs, she gave unconscious evidence of her late husband's tyranny.

"I was always against it, Medie. I wanted you to be called like Christians, but it was no use."

Then she further confessed that Nicholas had set his mind on a distinct form of talent for each of his offspring. She knew full well that, had he survived the fitful fever of horticulture, he would have ended his days in the endeavour to mould his young family to the shape of his hopes.

In thus incautiously indicating a significance in their baptismal names Mrs. Longstaffe unwittingly poured fuel on the flames of her daughter's ardent nature. Medea began to feel that she was predestined to a career. How could any one of her family fall into the everyday grooves of action and thought like ordinary Toms, Dicks, and Harrys? Surely, they were bound to make some deviation from the track of commonplace!

The absurdity of her classical name no longer seemed so great. She forgave her father freely as the vision of fame glimmered on her childish horizon, though naturally as she increased in stature and wisdom that horizon receded.

But at the present time Medea could see no reason why her cleverness should miscarry. The form of her renown she did not at once resolve. So far nothing she undertook was difficult.

Would she compose an opera to take the world by storm? Might she not become a great actress, before whom kings and conquerors would bow? Or could she not paint an immortal picture or write a book, the wisdom or pathos of which had never been paralleled? But Medea cherished such visions silently. She gave no hint to her mother that she entertained hopes of a glorious day when she, Medea Longstaffe, would declare the family name to honour, standing out from the rank and file of womankind as the worker of something great. As the thorny, mazy ways of learning became apparent to her, she recognized Miss Dormer's incompetence, and so she resolved on her appeal to the doctor.

The good man was unequal to the contest. Medea's plaintive voice and hungry-looking eyes touched some responsive chord. He blinked and writhed as she continued her charge.

"I have tried so hard, Dr. Morgan; you know how I have tried to draw straight gates and falling-down cottages like Miss Dormer's copies, and I have never seen real ones a bit like them. You have heard me play over and over again 'Partant pour la Syrie,' and 'Yankee Doodle,' and 'The Blue Bells of Scotland,' without music. I can go through Butler's Spelling backwards, with my eyes shut. I can say 'Child's Guide to Knowledge' by heart —and it isn't all true, either; and— and I know English History better than Miss Dormer does; and I'm *quite* sure she can't teach me anything I don't know. Polly is learning Latin at Bedmondstone Grammar School, and Euclid, and soon he will know more about them than I do; and I won't be able to help him, and he will look down on me; oh! oh! Dr. Morgan, it isn't fair at all. I like these things, and he hates them. I call it a most unjust

world, I do—I do! Why was I made a girl?"

Hereupon she set up a faint whimper. The doctor, being unable to answer the last query, rubbed his head. Nevertheless, his eyes twinkled merrily.

"But schools are very expensive, Medea, especially boarding-schools for girls."

Then the brown eyes—such wide-open brown eyes, that appeared to have so little lid to them, eyes that you could never imagine drowsy—bent a look of surprise upon the doctor. The look quickly changed to dismay. Every thought in Medea's mind was transparent to an onlooker through these clear windows. She answered quickly with a sort of breathless anger—

"There it is! Why am I a girl? You mean, doctor, that mamma cannot afford to send me away from home?"

"I am afraid not to a first-class establishment; and it would be useless to send you

to an inferior school. Miss Dormer's accomplishments would only repeat themselves."

Medea's visions of fame were suddenly dispelled. Beneath the doctor's practical discussion of school her castle fell to the ground. Bnt as her bright hopes faded at the breath of discouragement she did not cry out, as in contemplating Apollo's superior attainments. She only became suddenly pale and drew in her under lip. The inevitable must always be recognized and submitted to. But she would go away and face disaster alone. Her intention was discernible in her melancholy luminous eyes, as they were once more turned on her counsellor. Her legs were slowly uncoiled and dropped over the sill on the outside, as she prepared to slide down on the long-suffering geraniums, generally trampled on once a day by some pair of Longstaffe feet.

In turning from the doctor, Medea caught the gleam of compassion in his eye. She remembered that he always lent a sympathetic ear; and, swallowing the sobs that were imminent, she said fervently—

"You are very kind, Dr. Morgan, and you always have been kind. I know you can't help us being poor, or me being a girl. It is a great pity mamma didn't prevent *that*. But you might try and make them let girls go to grammar schools. If you were to say that I was clever, and would be no trouble, don't you think they might?"

As she looked earnestly at the doctor, she seemed to have a lingering expectation that such a notion might be entertained by the authorities if fitly presented to them by such a sober old gentleman.

The doctor shook his head gravely, concealing a smile as he approached the window, holding out his hand.

"I fear, Medie, that no one would listen to such a suggestion. Cheer up, child! Perhaps I can see a way out of this wood yet, if I can bring your mother to understand any sense in letting you go. Be off with you, and dig up your lexicons out of those boxes in the attic, and, depend upon it, you will be over the donkey's bridge long before Polly comes in sight of it."

The lexicons whereof the doctor spoke were part of the late rector's library.

Much unsaleable property in the way of literature remained on Mrs. Longstaffe's hands. Moths were no doubt fretting the pages of learning, and rust corrupting artistic treasures beneath the roof-tree of Woodbine Cottage.

Once more slow tears welled to Medea's eyes, tears of warm gratitude these. She seized the doctor's large hand and hugged it with passionate fervour before finally disappearing. It was characteristic of this

girl that she never doubted the fulfilment of the promise. So far she had met with few shocks to her faith, and as absolutely as she herself never failed to carry out a compact, so did she expect the same fulfilment from others. That she might now be a tiresome pleader, to be put off with a pacifying speech, never entered her head. Luckily it was not so in this case, and Medea's trust exacted from her friend a prompt performance of a dangerous duty. Not being metaphysical or cynical, he did not take time to consider if her gratitude in days to come would acknowledge so openly the benefits received. Knowledge puffeth up, it has been declared by many tongues; and it is certainly not unfrequent to find that those talented ladies and gentlemen who scale the heights of wisdom or fame deny any obligation to the humble instruments which aided their ascent!

As the doctor scanned the radiant face,

full of intelligence and feeling, noting the rapid throbs of the bounding heart beneath the hand she pressed to her breast, he had a queer sensation of something sticking in his throat. Medea's ardour had a strange power of touching the souls of those who came in contact with it.

The desire or effort to be just had a certain compensation for our friend in that feeling of tenderness, though he did rather ruefully cast a thought towards his matrimonial hopes. He was aware that they were in jeopardy, for if he attempted to carry out his compact with Medea, Mrs. Longstaffe would certainly label him a traitor.

CHAPTER V.

A MATTER OF HEART.

Dr. Morgan's paternal sentiments towards the young Longstaffes were, as you have probably divined, largely influenced by another feeling entertained towards their mother.

The loves of middle-aged people are such complicated matters, that in endeavouring to explain any machinery of motives surrounding this pair, I am conscious of risking the contempt of those more experienced in the workings of such intricate matters.

It is to be hoped that readers of advanced years will be lenient to an experimental pen. At any rate, they will not deny

that trifling differences of opinion and diversities of taste more easily mar the smooth course of proceedings with a mature couple, than do the downright quarrels and contrary desires of youthful lovers. Elderly suitors do not rashly venture to leave a margin for future developments or amendments, neither do they dare secretly to fashion a mould in the belief that woman will melt to any pattern. Young men are apt to arrogate to themselves plastic powers in ante-nuptial days. The veteran lover is more diffident in his hopes.

Now, our dear doctor knew very well that Mrs. Longstaffe was stiffened clay, and that Nicholas's neglect had served to develop more strongly the maternal sentiments of jealousy and devotion. She would probably accuse him of conspiring with Medea to set her authority at naught. He thought ruefully of the power of her clear blue eyes, and the touch of her

dimpled hands, knowing that if she made gentle overtures of peace or petition, his championship of right would be feeble. He stood pledged indeed to do his best for the oppressed one, but if softer feelings came in the way he might be undone.

Yet he was thoroughly convinced of sin in yielding himself captive to a cooing voice and a pink-and-white complexion. At the age of forty-five, even if a man be unmarried, perhaps more especially if he be a doctor, privileged to see behind the scenes of domestic matters, the wiles and ways of womanhood are fairly transparent.

The proverbially blind god opens one eye of his disciples before the fifth decade, and no amount of dust thrown about by the divinities who favour the ladies is thereafter capable of affecting a partially restored sight.

In the second year of her widowhood, shortly before Medea's appeal to the

superior court, Mrs. Longstaffe was observed by disapproving friends on the Green to assume a second youth, and a most unbecoming air of sprightliness. The ladies were naturally scandalized by the widow's expansion into comeliness. Her new claims to be heard and admired were most unseemly, and such trespasses against the looked-for demeanour of bereaved wives were not to be lightly condoned.

Freshness of complexion and independence of manner and opinion were the prerogatives of the prosperous, and the lady's former faded appearance and yielding behaviour were favourably referred to. It was when Mrs. Longstaffe held up her head, boldly beginning to call her soul her own, that Mrs. Parsons discovered she waved her hair artificially. The vanity of the woman, to be sure! And now her gowns were made to fit that tight, as

Miss Prinkerton the dressmaker could tell, that she could not so much as lift her arms! The mother of four children ought to be ashamed to have a waist nipped into that size!

Indeed, Lakenham was grievously afflicted at this manifestation of levity. It was such an unlooked-for occurrence that an insignificant little widow should take to a becoming bonnet and to smiling at the men. The Green failed to discover any cogent reason for this coquettish demeanour for some time. Alas! our poor Charlotte had been so heavily handicapped by her domestic tyrant in former years, that none had ever entertained a notion of her fair looks or sprightly capabilities.

Only the doctor had been aware of these things for a long time, and the turquoise blue of her eyes was no new discovery to him. The judicious adornments adopted by Mrs. Longstaffe were also noticed by

him and perhaps interpreted as signs significant of encouragement. When she abandoned her cap, and with apparent artlessness alluded to its removal in terms of modest regret, the doctor was undeniably justified in concluding that she wished him to admire her abundant brown hair.

"I do assure you, Dr. Morgan, I feel as if it was a disrespect towards poor Nicholas to lay it aside. Not that I forget my sad loss for an hour, but the children can't bear me in a cap, and Flossie does tumble the lappets dreadfully. You would hardly believe the sinful amount of money I have spent on caps, and Miss Prinkerton will always put the best materials in them. Me with such a quantity of hair, too! Only think of covering it all up! After all, doctor, a few yards of white *lisse* doesn't mean much—does it, now? It is the heart that mourns."

The doctor thought the absence of *lisse*

signified a good deal, as the widow sighed softly with downcast eyes. In considering how pretty the eyelashes were which shaded Charlotte's peach-like cheeks, Dr. Morgan forgot all about Nicholas.

Indeed, Mrs. Longstaffe was worth looking at. She was a round, cosy, little matron in these days, chirping perpetually like a lively little bird. By degrees her references to her late husband became tinged with a decided air of embarrassment. The heart no longer seemed to mourn with such determination! In her mind our Charlotte debated with a certain amount of distressed shame regarding her own extraordinary lightheartedness. She was sure she had no right in her forlorn situation to be lifted up with any happiness, or even moderate cheerfulness. The light in her eyes and the rose pink on her cheek were a palpable affront to the memory of Nicholas. An exhilarating

quickening of her pulses would sometimes follow such reflections if she recalled how the doctor had retained her hand and looked into her eyes at their last parting.

What could it mean? Again her heart fluttered mysteriously. Then she raised her eyes to the glass over the mantel-shelf, and smiled weakly at the image without the cap. Of course she could not snub Dr. Morgan prematurely. It might all mean nothing; and was he not her children's best friend and her only counsellor? Here Mrs. Longstaffe became pensive, and smoothed down some stray locks which had a sportive appearance. But if his attentions did take a turn leaving no room for doubt? Here Mrs. Longstaffe frowned sternly at her own too blooming face. In that case she would firmly, but delicately of course, intimate the impossibility of any new relations between them. It was utterly, of course quite utterly, out of the

question that she could ever contemplate a second marriage. And then she sighed sadly and looked less sternly at the pretty reflection.

Though Mrs. Longstaffe's conscience was so very emphatic in this matter, it yet suffered her to insinuate coquettish hints in her attire, and did not forbid her to smile her sweetest welcome towards her friend. She owned that the gentleman was not personally objectionable to her. Indeed, she was quite sure that no other youthful matron would flout such an admirer. But the principle of the thing—the bare contemplation of gentle passages or marriage for a widow—was shameful.

In reality, the doctor was but an average sample of a fresh-coloured, well-built Englishman. He bore no resemblance to Nicholas, who had been tall and thin, with a long jaw and a cadaverous complexion, and eyes which his admirers were wont

to consider pregnant with slumbering thought.

Dr. Morgan was inclined to be portly, as well befits a man of mature years. He had a merry grey eye, with a most unphilosophical twinkle, arguing no somnolent operations in *his* mind. Happily for those who come after in this tale, he held no theories. Secretly our little widow rated this good man's intelligence as of vastly inferior calibre, though she was willing to concede his conversational powers as decidedly attractive. Of course his mind was superficial, for if it had been engrossed on vital speculations his powers of entertainment would not have been so great.

This gentleman's practice was not highly lucrative, the district about Lakenham being but thinly populated with a not highly remunerative class of patients. The doctor scoured the country between Oldford on the west and Bedmondstone on the

cast behind his good grey mare, in order to mend broken bones and minister to diseased bodies, without becoming famous. Between these two towns no other medical practitioner set himself up to patch and darn the web of life, so he had it all his own way. He did certainly manage to make a living out of this tailoring profession, and to put by a small sum annually, but he was not promoted to the honour of those who check the rich man's gout or labour as chamberlains to usher his heirs into the light of day.

At this epoch no feverish symptoms or temporary aberrations of mind made the doctor's love affair a matter of danger to his rustic patients. Small tradesmen were not neglected during its progress, and he was punctual as ever at the call of farmers' and curates' wives.

The malady ran its course in a natural way, there being no checks. It must

be admitted Dr. Morgan's heart was well regulated, rarely thumping out of time. The pulses of middle-age have the advantage under such circumstances of not being so vigorous in action as those of youthful lovers.

Dear madam, do I hear you call my friend phlegmatic? It may be that he was, and that an element of common sense controlled his passion and demanded a long consideration of a dangerous leap.

But there were certain lynx-like feminine eyes to which mildly inflammatory symptoms became apparent. Mrs. Jagger, brevet rank, otherwise Eliza Jagger, spinster, of an uncertain age, ministered to the doctor's domestic comfort. She ruled the roast tyrannically. As a matter of course, her weak point was the state of her master's affections. One afternoon this personage approached her front of auburn curls closely to Tibbs's scandal-

loving ear, which was unfortunately a deaf one, decreeing positively what would become of the doctor if he continued to hang about the widow's cottage.

"He's a man made to be took in," she concluded with a doleful shake of her head.

Mrs. Jagger was the first of the faction which detected a frisky significance in the prominence given to bugles on Mrs. Longstaffe's summer bonnet.

Tibbs, from being formerly odd man to the Longstaffes, was credited with a knowledge of the lady's mind. But he was leal to early principles of honour, and quarrelled with future chances of beer at the doctor's back door by loyally vindicating the widow's constancy.

"Yow thinks as she's one chevy yeowr maister? Dang it! Mrs. Jagger, there's none like a spinster for layin' the trail of matermoney. Yow'll find a mate for ivvery cross-eyed slut 'tween here and Oldford, I'll

warrant. It wholly beats me out that yow hevn't arguyfied some bline-man yoursef to being axed at chutch. Dorn't talk of Mrs. Longstaffe. She ain't one to put her head in collar agen, yow may 'pend on it. She thinks nowadays ov nowt more than they brats. Mary Ann Allnut she toad me last night as Miss Medie, the jade, she's tarning obstropolous, and the missis she's timmersome 'twill end in larnin'. By gom! the darter mus' run after her dad! It ain't reasonable to expect no consequence from the munniment!"

Very naturally Mrs. Jagger was aggrieved by Mr. Tibbs's outspoken comments on her maiden weakness, and he was suffered to depart without any offer of the customary refreshment. She subsequently rated his penetration more highly, observing a coolness to spring up between the widow and her master. Of course we who are privileged to draw aside the curtain are aware

that Medea caused this breach of friendship. As our good doctor had anticipated, the first mention of a boarding-school threw Mrs. Longstaffe into a fever of revolt. Instead, however, of judiciously melting into tears and deprecating her friend's advice, she deported herself after an unexpected fashion. She flew into a violent rage, doing something under the table which sounded suspiciously like stamping her foot, while her colour rose to the hue of an angry turkey's.

"It is *you*, then, who have been encouraging that naughty girl! Oh yes, I knew there was some one at the bottom of it all. I see you want to unsex her, and to teach her to despise her mother. And she was getting on so nicely with her music, Miss Dormer said, and I was going to let her learn to paint flowers on silk—a nice ladylike accomplishment. It is too bad of you, Dr. Morgan; indeed, I thought better of you. I never thought you would be one

to turn round on me, after all I have gone through, and put high notions of education in her head. There, I tell you I won't have it; do you hear me? She's my child, and no one else shall interfere. I'm her natural guardian—you know you told me so—and I'm sure the law doesn't allow it."

This was hurled at the poor doctor's head as a triumphant conclusion. Medea's cause was wellnigh lost, for he was piqued. What an infernal fool he was to mix himself up in this business! Then suddenly there came back to his recollection the pathetic cadence of the pleader's voice, and he felt again the passionate gratitude of her hand-grip.

Looking intently at a spot on the carpet, he spoke once more, this time in calmly professional terms, very alarming to his angry opponent.

"But, my dear lady, you must consider for a moment the exceptional circumstances

of this case. You have had the misfortune, we will call it, to have given birth to a female child endowed with more than ordinary capacities. Nature has, of course, given her an intellectual appetite to correspond with abnormal powers of assimilation. I suppose you understand that what would feed a pigmy would starve a giant? The girl is at a critical age. She will probably fall ill, or into chronic melancholy, if her brain is not suffered to work in a healthy way. She is morbid, sensitive, and irritable, as you have frequently complained to me. As well, dear madam, might you expect creatures with stomachs to be healthy without food, as brains of fine quality to maintain a just balance without a proper adjustment of information."

This was quite a new way of talking from the doctor. It bewildered Charlotte, faintly recalling the lost one.

"Polly doesn't worry my life out with senseless questions, or sit poring from morning till night over books. Why can't Medie behave like other girls and boys?" she said fretfully.

Of course it was evident to Dr. Morgan and every one else of an understanding mind that Apollo might just as well have been baptized Maurice. His heathen exemplar had certainly not overshadowed him or helped him to scale the hill of learning. The one talent he carefully cherished was the capacity for mischief. Yet he was a brave, bright lad, full of high spirits, and of that intrepid nature which the deceased Nicholas had condemned as mere "animal instinct."

"Dear madam, Apollo is made of other metal. Rest well assured he will never do you credit in the same direction as Medea."

Charlotte began to whimper faintly, "But I—I don't want her to do me credit.

Don't I know what comes of learning and books? People get wrapped up in their own selfish tastes, and sacrifice every one else. Then, if they fail, other people have to bear their bad tempers and all the misery of it. You're just encouraging her to look down on me. I never was clever or able to learn things. Wasn't it bad enough to be made to feel myself a stupid, ignorant woman for ten years of my life? And now it is all going to begin again—only it will be worse. Why did I ever have a clever child? I'm sure it isn't my fault. I suppose it's all because of her dreadful name. And she will go on and on, with all kinds of wickedness, like the woman she's called after. She'll not be a respectable character. Oh, you needn't smile, doctor; I am not so ignorant that I don't know all about her. No, no; there must be an end of all this. I can't afford a school."

Mrs. Longstaffe then threw herself back in her chair with an air of decision.

When the doctor took upon himself to cut away the ground of this excuse from beneath her feet, she bridled up, casting upon him a look of fierce anger.

"But, Mrs. Longstaffe, I have promised Medea that her education *shall* be carried on outside Lakenham. And sooner than that this great disappointment should be hers, I have hit upon a very feasible plan, which need not fall heavily on your resources. If we can agree on this matter, I propose that she shall be sent to my sister at Brighton, who, as you very well know, keeps a school." The doctor was cautious not to mention the professor's renown, or to hint at his advocacy of feminine progress. He went on, "The expenses incurred will be a mere trifle, for I know that Mary will gladly welcome such a promising pupil from my hands. I can vouch for the establishment

being first-class, and can assure you that Medea's physical well-being will not be sacrificed to her studies."

The matter-of-fact tone and the grave looks of her counsellor oppressed Mrs. Longstaffe's soul with a nameless dread. Her perturbed frame of mind was evident. What had she done to be treated in this unfriendly, business-like way? She rose suddenly from her seat and sought to hide her mortification at the window. The view had not a soothing effect. The children were within sight, playing in the garden. But Medea, pale and listless, was not using her skipping-rope with any vigour. She leaned against the laburnum tree looking towards the room where the doctor and her mother were holding counsel.

She felt quite sure it was a momentous interview, and that her future was trembling in the balance. The wide-eyed sadness of her daughter's gaze smote Mrs. Long-

staffe's heart. Medea was no longer defiant, but pleading. Why was she placing herself in an attitude of enmity towards this child, embittering her young days? The tragic despair of the little figure drove the distracted mother back to face the doctor.

"But if Madame Freudenthal takes Medea at a lower rate than other girls under her charge it will be charity, Dr. Morgan. My children ought not to accept such favours from you—they have no claim on you."

The lady lifted her downcast face with a weak effort to be haughty. The remembrance that she was a Godbold had come upon her suddenly.

"And why not upon me? Is there any reason why they should not have a claim on me, any obstacle to my standing to them in the light of—of a parent?" Dr. Morgan grew very red in the face, and came a few paces nearer. "Charlotte, will you not give me this right?"

So it had come at last, and unexpectedly, as long-looked-for things often do. As the doctor stretched out his hand to take the widow's and give point to his question, she quickly covered her face, drawing away from him and crying out plaintively—

"Oh no—no, not that! You must not speak to me in that way. No one can ever take *his* place."

Then the doctor felt that the tentative question, which had suddenly been forced from him, was not a success. His warmth of manner relapsed into frigid courtesy. He, too, drew back, making no faint attempt to press his suit. Oh, wise man! Oh, incomparably patient lover!

It may be the lady thought he would force her hand, for presently she withdrew the pocket-handkerchief, raised to absorb tears that did not flow. She wanted to see what he was about, and found him searching for his hat under a chair. Having

discovered it, and given it a gentle brush with his sleeve, he rose slowly from his seat. Under such circumstances very few men could have looked so dignified; but no rebuff was declared by his demeanour.

"Then, I am to conclude, Mrs. Longstaffe, that your answer is decisive? I am sorry to say I can no longer hold myself responsible for Medea's health. Her brain is in a very excitable state."

He was not above taking this revenge, and playing on her maternal fears. He would scarcely have been human otherwise. With this concluding threat he bowed ceremoniously to the widow, and passed on the other side of the table. She stood interlacing her fingers with a perplexed gaze in her eyes. He opened the door.

"Dr. Morgan, I—I——"

"Good morning, Mrs. Longstaffe."

"Stay—one moment—*please*."

He still retained his hold of the door-handle.

"If—if it is really true—that you have promised Medea she shall go to school, I—I will think about it. Are you quite sure that Miss Dormer——"

Her glance fell as he caught her up quickly.

"Madam, I am *quite* sure."

That "madam" seemed to have such a big M! Who would ever have given this easy-going doctor credit for assuming such an angry mien? The lady's breath came unevenly as she humbled herself yet more and more.

"Then, if you will be good enough to communicate with Madame Freudenthal, and ask if she has a vacancy, I—I will see about it."

Charlotte played with the tassel of her apron. Her colour was heightened; but

he did not know then how near the tears were to falling.

"I will write to-night. Good-day, Mrs. Longstaffe."

Alas! there were no more "dear ladies" and such-like tender addresses from the doctor's lips for a long time.

Having watched her friend out of sight, I am sorry to say that Mrs. Longstaffe, in spite of her thirty-five years, sat down and wept copiously. It might be that these floods of tears were to be accounted for by the prospective parting from Medea. Still, I have my doubts, and you are privileged to have yours.

In the course of a month the girl was got ready for her new life, and finally taken down and installed at the collegiate establishment at Brighton by the doctor himself.

The annual sum it was notified to Mrs. Longstaffe that she would be called upon

to pay for her daughter's education seemed wholly inadequate to defray a tenth part of the studies undertaken. But during the coolness which now existed between the widow and the doctor she had no opportunity of broaching the subject of Madame Freudenthal's charges. Medea had been the electric spark which had made an end of her sweet hopes—hopes which only became apparent to Mrs. Longstaffe after their destruction.

Any further reference to school matters should never proceed from her lips. In these days she went about sadly, and mourned afresh for Nicholas. Mrs. Jagger triumphed when she saw fresh crape tacked on to the lady's gowns. Now it became apparent that the doctor's rare visits to Woodbine Cottage were purely professional.

CHAPTER VI.

DOUBTS AND PERPLEXITIES.

An unlooked-for cause of anxiety rose like a cloud on the horizon of Mrs. Longstaffe's tranquil life. It did not long remain at a low level, but, gathering strength, spread over her whole heaven, sensibly darkening her days. This happened during Medea's first term, and helped to convince the widow of the vanity of human hopes. Hitherto the new rector had devoted himself to good works in the parish without the assistance of any companion. He had led his bachelor life with apparently a keen enjoyment of mortifications of the flesh. Whether it was the

result of ascetic practices and long endurance of horsehair shirts, as currently reported, or the natural sequence of water arrowroot and a vegetarian diet of cucumbers and potatoes, was not positive, but he fell ill. A maiden sister of personable appearance promptly appeared on the scene, for the ostensible purpose of nursing him. It was said that the Rev. Edward made no exuberant demonstrations of welcome when the fair Olivia arrived without a summons.

But Mrs. Longstaffe could not close her ears to certain whisperings which ensued. An affectation of indifference did not protect her from the gossip of her neighbours. While Mr. Pilkington's illness necessitated Dr. Morgan's daily attendance at the rectory, Charlotte turned her face steadily to the wall of her chamber; that is to say, to the contemplation of Nicholas's portrait. Every morning as she peered over her muslin

blind and saw the doctor start off across the Green in the direction of a new enchantress, she vowed to herself that she would never meet with such a paragon as her late husband, shedding many tears over her assertions, and implicitly believing that they flowed solely from tender recollections. As for Miss Pilkington, our little widow treated her with the most studied courtesy, being most punctilious in daily "kind inquiries" and omitting no jot or tittle of what Lakenham etiquette demanded of its parishioners.

Mary Ann Allnut was frequently the medium of communication, and kept Mrs. Longstaffe's wounds open by means of tittle-tattle carried back from the rectory kitchen.

Undeniably the rector's sister was a handsome lady of a showy type—one who wore a scarlet feather and steel ornaments with advantage, she considered. Those ladies

who were kindly disposed towards her said she was "somewhere about nine and twenty." The Rubicon of "thirty" sounds so hopeless. Moreover, this siren had a small fortune of her own, concerning which she would not have the doctor ignorant.

This good man was quite well aware of the nodding of heads and of many significant smiles, being conscious that Miss Pilkington was setting her cap at him, otherwise the noble coronet of plaits, which crowned the edifice of her flaxen locks. Somehow those too abundant locks never won the doctor's approval. His recollection of a sleek brown head with neat braids worn low on the neck, effaced the more striking picture of fashion. The fair Olivia never flashed her glittering orbs over a prescription handed to her without recalling to his mind drooping white lids shading soft blue eyes, equally ready for tears as smiles.

Not a doubt of it, Miss Pilkington was

an accomplished lady. When she banged off her chromatic fireworks on the old-fashioned pianos round about Lakenham these modest instruments trembled in convulsions of surprise, or quivered in agonized despair at their own incompetence to meet the demands made on their power. Miss Dormer's *cheval de bataille*, the "Battle of Prague," was no longer heard. It was declared also that Miss Pilkington discoursed familiarly in French and Spanish —Spanish on the strength of her guitar. And yet the doctor thought he would prefer a companion less accomplished and less fashionable. As I have set forth, his tastes with regard to womanly charms were much in the rear of progress. It is not probable that this worthy man's attention had been directed to the renewal of crape tucks on Mrs. Longstaffe's gowns, or to the banishment of sinful bugles from her Sunday bonnet, yet he did notice at last a wistful

expression in her blue eyes when they casually encountered his, followed generally by a girl-like droop of confusion. Alas! Charlotte blushed even now. Except toward Miss Pilkington she knew nought of dignity.

After such encounters of looks, the doctor would smile softly. He began even to hum lively little tunes at odd times.

Towards Christmas Mrs. Jagger, coupling these malpractices with a discovery she made one Sunday afternoon, suffered qualms of a new sort. Her anguish was beyond its former degree when she detected her master investigating the condition of the drawing-room furniture beneath its holland coverings, at an hour when he judged his devout housekeeper would be at chapel. These manœuvres were to be ascribed to Miss Pilkington's influence, of course. And Mrs. Jagger

realized that the little widow, with her tribe of unruly brats, would have been a preferable ill to the introduction of the frivolous Olivia. That flighty young person not only neglected domestic duties, and was the possessor of an insatiable thirst for admiration, but was disposed to Ritualism and "popish practices." Mrs. Jagger lent a willing ear to the reports of scandalized church-goers, to whom Miss Pilkington's genuflections and bowings were abhorrent, she herself being a Wesleyan.

However, matters had not come to a crisis when Medea returned to Woodbine Cottage for her first vacation. Mrs. Longstaffe very naturally expected that a visit from the doctor would shortly follow her daughter's arrival. She set her house and her person in order accordingly. For two afternoons she sat beside her hearthstone arrayed in her Sunday best, hair at glossiest, elaborately plaited, and a pink

flush of expectation embellishing her round face. Alas! alas! the third afternoon, being Christmas Eve, the flush faded and the blue eyes no longer looked hopefully across the Green. Mrs. Longstaffe sighed in her soul, "I am aweary," sitting idly with her knitting on her knee. At the fading of daylight a ring at the bell raised the flush once more. The fire, gone dull and hollow, was quickly stirred into a more vigorous life, and the knitting resumed with energy. After all, it only turned out to be a parcel of presents, as usual, from the doctor to the children, with a verbal invitation for them to take tea at his house. No note for Charlotte! not a word of Christmas greeting. Mrs. Jagger, wearing her brightest auburn front, bound round with a black velvet band, brought the parcel. She delivered her message with lugubrious solemnity.

"I wish you a merry Christmas, Mrs.

Jagger. I hope you are quite well, and that the doctor is quite well," said Charlotte, knitting away at her sock with eyes cast down.

Mrs. Jagger sighed wearily. "Not much of a merry time for me, mum, with things as I sees to look forward to between now and next Christmas. Oh, *he's* well enough, Mrs. Longstaffe, you may be sure. I never did see *him* in such spirits as of late. He whistles all over the house just like a bird in courting time—a man of his years, too! Ay, dear, there's no counting on a man's sense at no time of his life. There's some, they tell me, as go skipping to a hanging with a cheerful face; and to my mind he's looking at a noose which ain't no better."

Then the widow turned quickly away and moved out of the kitchen, muttering something indefinite concerning her children's sashes.

Mary Ann Allnut pricked up eager ears, ready to avail herself of an unlooked-for chance of gleaning information. Mrs. Jagger, being from London, held herself aloof as something superior to domestics of rustic extraction, frowning discouragement on the free-and-easy address of Mrs. Longstaffe's maid-of-all-work.

"Is he hankerin' after Miss Pilkington? Well, he ain't got no cause to be so meuly mouthed. It's as plain as the mole on your cheek she's a-waiting to be ax'd. Ain't she been auctioneerin' of her figger and clothes for months gone by? Why, he be over-timmersome for a man of his years."

Mary Ann's well-intended encouragement produced an unaccountable bridling of her visitor's head, and a corresponding angularity of shoulder, mystifying to the broad-featured damsel, whose meaning was void of offence.

Before any words appropriate to the occasion could be summoned to Mrs. Jagger's lips the children were ushered in by Mrs. Longstaffe. Having cloaked her little flock, the fond mother watched them down the garden, standing in the dusk beneath the trellised porch. The cottage seemed cold and empty when she returned to it. She missed the noisy voices and the patter of little steps. It made her more lonely and sad to hear Mary Ann Allnut singing in the kitchen. Seated in the twilight, she bethought her suddenly, with dismal joy, of a certain drawer of hidden treasures. Here was an opportunity to survey her buried blisses. She anticipated the kindling of remorse with the same exhilarating sort of feeling as that which animated a Flagellaut of the thirteenth century.

Charlotte liked to feed and fatten that worm which we are told dieth not.

She spent a tearful evening of enjoyment, remorsefully considering the relics of her maiden days and courtship. Amongst the precious reminders of bygone blisses, which Mrs. Longstaffe was quite sure she had once enjoyed, there lay concealed a large cameo brooch. It had been given to her during her engagement, and a lock of Nicholas's hair, straight and dull, was secreted in a little recess behind it. The widow shuddered perceptibly as she looked at the brooch, whereon was carved a classic head, possibly Medea's. The mud-coloured tuft of hair, which had once crowned the high and narrow brow of the departed one, seemed, though she smoothed it affectionately, to have no magic power of reviving wifely feelings. Charlotte laid it aside with a sigh of disappointment.

Below all other things in her hiding-place lay a portrait of herself at the age of eighteen. Mrs. Longstaffe scanned her

youthful charms with eager interest. Then she locked the door and lighted a second candle. Next she advanced to the mirror, with the miniature in her hand, proceeding to compare line by line her face as represented in the looking-glass, and as the limner's art had pictured it some sixteen years ago. No mortification of spirit resulted as she appraised her charms. On the contrary, pleased smile might have been detected as the result. There could be no doubt of it; her comely matronhood and plump vigour were more attractive than the slimness of her youthful figure and the delicate pallor of her girlish complexion. There was something inane and simpering about the maiden which the widow had cast off. The lady mused in an abstracted way till the odour of a smoking wick offended her nostrils. She extinguished her dreams as she snuffed out the expiring candle, and with a gentle

sigh proceeded to fasten more bonds of the past about herself.

The packet of Nicholas's letters, which she now took up, was not a bulky one, but each letter was lengthy, and worded in high-flown language. Occasionally Nicholas had thought he was flying when he got him up on his stilts and wordy elevations. But stilts are not wings, more than pedantry is thought, though the height of words above commonplace understandings is often enough persuasive that the speaker of them ought to be one in authority over us.

Not the faintest scintillation of gentle love or playfulness illuminated the epistles of Nicholas. It was a toilsome duty for the unaccustomed eyes to decipher the crabbed writing, for the unwilling mind to interpret the inflated language of their scribe.

Mrs. Longstaffe caught herself specu-

lating if other women found any difficulty in the perusal of their lovers' letters after date; that is to say, when they had become husbands.

Truly, there are many of us who keep such bundles of letters till later times, perhaps boasting of the number received. But do all of us peruse them with the same lover-like eyes and minds in the years that come after? How many illusions have faded between the then and now? Our hopes are dead, and there is no process of embalming possible for them. Well, well! we cherish these bygone records with a sort of superstition, binding them in ribbons and hiding them in secret drawers and secure despatch-boxes; but we had better not talk about them or even proclaim our own faithfulness.

Charlotte's plump little hands were numb with cold long before the collection had been looked through. She was too con-

scientious in this reprisal against her own forgetfulness to skip tiresome tirades concerning the world's stupidity towards genuine merit, or to glance aside from demonstrations of unsolvable problems. She did suppress her yawns occasionally. Still, the widow undoubtedly felt that she was in a way atoning to Nicholas for any temporary oblivion of his merits. After all, I am not sure that this was not a rite of purification, ridding her unquiet bosom of some perilous stuff in the way of rancour and uncharitableness. When the children's voices broke across the frosty night air, as they chattered on their way across the Green, all bitterness died away. Charlotte only remembered that she had her full share of woman's happiness, being crowned with the great glory and gain of motherhood—a joy which Miss Pilkington or no other could take from her.

She swept her treasures back into the

drawer. The darlings must not find her absent from the fireside. These darlings, apostrophized with tears and a lingering heartache, were very riotous and excited, eager to relate all the details of the evening's entertainment. Speaking all at once in a clamorous way, they disburdened themselves of various items of news on the very threshold. Dr. Morgan had surpassed himself in his efforts to amuse them. He shone with favour in the family eyes, and a unanimous vote of thanks was shouted forth. The tea provided had been a spread worthy of a king, even to Apollo's critical judgment. This youth inherited from his father the glory of a critical palate, much to Mary Ann Allnut's disgust, she not having entirely forgotten her early trials over the stewpans.

Flossie, with her golden curls tumbled about her eyes, which shone as brightly as the stars outside, told a tragic tale of how

she "upsetted the cream" over her embroidered frock, while Philomela, in her language of signs, pantomimed the disaster. The three-year-old baby, soon fretted by her mother's kisses, struggled to reach her new doll reposing on the sofa. Phil, never impatient to loving demonstrations, quickly took the vacated seat of honour on her mother's knee, signifying by gestures the delights of "blind man's buff." Bandaging her blue eyes with her handkerchief, she stretched out her hands to feel some one. Her ringing laugh echoed like music as Apollo, advancing with open mouth, received her fingers between his teeth.

"Mother, the drawing-room has got a new wall-paper and a piano in it. Dr. Morgan made me play on it, and it is quite as good as Madame Freudenthal's own; I mean her very own—not those jingly things she keeps for the girls to practice

on. And Mrs. Jagger says all the bedrooms have been measured for new carpets. She made us go up to take off our hats, and the best room is ever so grand with red curtains and tassels and a carved bed," said Medea.

Considering the recent vows of fealty to a memory, Mrs. Longstaffe's heart gave very irrational leaps.

"Perhaps Dr. Morgan has come into a fortune, Medie," she said, with a weak attempt at playfulness. But it was very unsuccessful, her voice not being absolutely steady.

Apollo gave a boy's derisive laugh, without doubt the most aggravating form of contempt yet invented.

"I can tell you better than that. You women go about always looking in the wrong corners. Dr. Morgan is going to be married, and I know who it is to. I heard Adam Snell—you know him, Medie; he's

got the white ferrets, and he's going to give me a tame hawk—tell all about it. He works odd days in the rectory gardens. I was going along Oldford road yesterday, and heard him shouting out something secret to Tibbs, who said he wouldn't breathe a word of it. I just stopped a minute behind the wall, as I wanted to hear the secret, too. My! she is a stunner that Miss Pilkington. The sort I'll have for a wife some day. She gave me a flower out of her dress on Sunday. Won't she just cut a dash in the doctor's new gig on market days! Why, mother, how pale you are! Is it sitting up for us?"

Fortunately Philomela demonstrated at this moment in a very pointed manner her disgust at the general neglect of her urgent signs. Mrs. Longstaffe, in answer to repeated tugs, quickly bent her head over the new picture-book. Two large drops pattered down on Robinson Crusoe's head, to the little girl's dismay. Being practically

minded, she quickly whipped out her morsel of a handkerchief, well seasoned with raspberry jam, and applied its sweet solace to her mother's eyes. Then she looked round about her sharply as if to discover the cause of emotion. Somebody must be naughty. Did not the mother always cry when she was helpless in the midst of rebels? Apollo and Medea, who were sparring vigorously over the doctor's matrimonial intentions, did not observe this little by-play.

"I don't believe Dr. Morgan would have her if there wasn't another woman. He always looks the other way in church. I know he can't bear her fan and feathers. I wonder why she says her prayers so loud. I don't think that anyhow God would listen to her. Polly, do you know she really has got false hair pinned on her head; and, though you won't believe it, she *does* wear trousers, real trousers, when she goes out riding on Mr. Pilkington's cob. Mary

Ann Allnut has seen them—just like a man's—so there!" Medea's modest mind could not be reconciled to this Amazonian freak.

"Mary Ann Allnut is a chattering fool. Mrs. Jaggar said so, too. Don't you just wish you'd got big eyes that roll up and down like lightning, as Miss Pilkington's do, instead of stupid-looking goggles that only gape wide open and tell all you're thinking about? There, you are staring like an owl now, I do declare! Who'd care to hear you play your dull old psalm tunes on the doctor's piano if Miss Pilkington was there? Oh, you think yourself mighty clever you do, but you aren't a patch on her yet."

These brotherly jeers were too much for this small heroine. The pupils of her eyes dilated, portending the gathering of a storm. A burning colour spread over her face, and with a gasping sob she opened

her lips to speak. The storm of invective was averted by Mrs. Longstaffe's interference.

"Children, that will do. You must not quarrel about Miss Pilkington. Of course she is a very superior person. And, Apollo, let me tell you that Medie has got very nice eyes indeed, and I'm sure they have much more sense than *some* people's who only stare about to be admired. Some day your sister's music will be as good as *any one's*. Though she hasn't got big sprawling hands to run up and down the piano, with a bang here and a crash there, yet there is a deal more trouble in playing that quiet way—classical they call it."

At this moment Apollo, wearied of listening, furtively pulled Medea's hair, with a whispered "Rats' tails."

Hereupon Mrs. Longstaffe, further incensed, stood up to enforce respect.

"Once for all, Apollo, I will not have you

be rude to your sister. If you like to set up Miss Pilkington before your own flesh and blood—and you've told me to my face that my waist is thicker than hers—you may do it in the *doctor's* house. As for your hawk that Snell has promised you, I'll not have it at Woodbine Cottage. There's the chickens, that will never be safe, and dear Flossie to be pecked at." Apollo was for once struck dumb. He was amazed at the angry speech and dignified air of his placable little mother. Olivia's partisan was completely cowed. "Take off those dirty boots at once, Polly. I see you've been walking in the ditches on purpose, when there was a nice clean road all the way from the doctor's. Mary Ann Allnut is not going to scrub the stairs to-morrow morning again, I can tell you. Medie, my dear, take Floss to bed with you. Phil is going to sleep with me to-night."

This favour, being indicated to the little

dumb girl, was received with rapturous applause from her ever-ready hands.

In her times of anxiety or mental disturbance Charlotte always lavished a double amount of affection upon the child the world called afflicted. Still, the loving embraces of demonstrative arms failed to keep Nicholas in mind to-night. The widow's loyalty was sadly at fault. Towards the morning hours she cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER VII.

A CONQUERING HERO.

"WHERE'S your mother, Medea? Not at church on Christmas Day, hey?" said the doctor, with unusual asperity in his voice, as he saluted the Longstaffe children after service.

"She's got a headache, Dr. Morgan, and she looks quite tired and pale. She is lying down on the sofa, and I gave her a Prayer-book and smelling-bottle."

The doctor sniffed at the keen air which met him in the porch. Here was a very natural excuse for an unsolicited call, and he was not slow to take advantage of it.

"Ill, is she? The first time since she

came to Lakenham that I've known her ail anything. Apollo, where are you off to?"

This active-minded youth, having concealed his skates behind a tombstone before church, now considered himself absolved from further Sabbath-like duties, and was well away from his family when the doctor's voice reached him.

"He's going up to the Hall lake to skate. We don't have our dinner till two o'clock to-day, because Mary Ann forgot to put the pudding on in time," exclaimed Medea, as she marched along in company with the doctor.

Having come in sight of Woodbine Cottage, the doctor again addressed himself to Medea.

"Take Phil up to my house and tell Mrs. Jagger she is to give you both some more of that cake you approved of last night. Very probably you'll require a dose of physic to-morrow, but I shan't

charge for it. Then you can look for a bottle of lotion on the table in the dispensary, and take it to Mrs. Glover. I forgot it on my way to church, and the poor old soul is crazy with rheumatism. As I'm so near, I think I'll just look in and see what's amiss with your mother. There's no occasion to hurry, Medea."

Having disposed of such small observers, the doctor walked up the path to Woodbine Cottage. On this occasion he unlatched the gate with a very clear notion of a critical business in hand. His heart did not play its customary measure. There was a *crescendo* perceptible in its throbbing as he came nearer the house. Burglars were unknown in this locality, a primitive honesty holding its own, therefore front doors were never locked. The doctor did not deem it necessary to ring the bell, Mary Ann Allnut being of course engaged with the pudding.

Having the gentle step of his profession, Mrs. Longstaffe, who lay asleep on the sofa, did not hear her friend's entry. The Prayer-book had fallen unopened to the ground, and the smelling-bottle lay disregarded on the table. The light from an unshaded window shone full on the widow's face. One round cheek, childlike in its lovely curves, was pillowed on her dimpled hand. A tear still rested on her eyelashes, though she smiled in her sleep. According to Lowell she was "smiley round the lips, and teary round the lashes."

The doctor thought it was all very pretty as he took possession of the chair nearest to her. He surveyed her face attentively, which I think was taking a mean advantage of a favourable situation. But he knew there was little time to be lost before a crew of unruly children would put an end to opportunity. For once this philosophic lover precipitated matters. He

gently laid a hand on the lady's brow. She woke without a start to full consciousness. Then, ah! then—yes, a quick colour flooded her face with the lovely blush of a girl. This change of colour disconcerted the doctor, and the palpitations became rather louder. His hand was yet tingling a little from the contact with his patient's soft hair.

"How you startled me, Dr. Morgan!" said the lady, assuming pettishness to hide her confusion.

"A merry Christmas to you, dear lady. Medea told me you were out of sorts, so I have come to look for a new patient. I expect her to be very docile."

The increased warmth of the doctor's tone was unmistakable, and the resuming of the "dear lady" sounded like music to her ears. Charlotte glowed beneath it all. Nevertheless, she raised herself from her recumbent position with dignity, asseverating with some heat—

"Nothing of the kind, Dr. Morgan; I had only a slight headache this morning, which has quite passed away. Medea is foolish to mention such ailments. I assure you I am in the best of health."

And so she certainly looked now, with the rose-pink on her cheek and a bright light in her eyes.

Still, the doctor took her hand gently, quite in a professional way, of course. She did not resist. The pulse beat irregularly and strongly, and Charlotte was not able to lift her eyes. Did it argue a high fever? Then our doctor extended another hand, and in a way that was not at all professional passed it round the lady's waist.

"Are you going to send me away again, Charlotte?" said the doctor, withdrawing at a faint sign of repugnance. He stood up before her with a decided look of anger.

This time the widow was in a terrible

fright. What if he went away again offended? It was certain he would never come back a third time. She had some difficulty to restrain her tears.

"I never—did—send you away, Dr. Morgan," she said with halting speech.

She did not help her suitor as she might have done, and Dr. Morgan felt that this was but a bungling performance. He saw a tear slowly trickle down her cheek.

"Will you be friends with me, Mrs. Longstaffe? I do not like this coldness that has come between us."

He was slow to read the signs of compunction and yielding.

"I have always been friends. It—it has *never* been my fault," she murmured faintly.

For a moment the doctor's eyes twinkled. Yet he was cautious to bring no charge against her.

"Then, let us shake hands upon a new

compact. Look up, and let us clear away all misunderstandings. It is 'peace and goodwill,' remember, to-day."

Slowly the drooping white lids were raised to the level of the doctor's scarf. Then they seemed as if they could travel no higher. She was like a bashful young girl overjoyed with some strange new experience opening to her view.

It was, indeed, Charlotte's first knowledge of a real wooing and all its attendant hopes and fears. This courtship was passing sweet. Perhaps for this reason she was inclined to prolong the preliminaries.

The joys that come to us late in life are so unexpected. We have made acquaintance with sorrow and disappointment so often that great blisses have a treble power to bless when they meet us in the years we have grown accustomed to regard as dull and pulseless.

Hesitating and palpitating, with lips trembling, the widow stretched out her hand and laid it on the broad palm extended to her. Her little fingers trembled till the doctor tightened his grasp over them.

"We are friends now?"

She assented with a weak nod. Somehow her voice would not be controlled. Once more he sat down beside her, still holding her plump hand tightly. Oh! Mrs. Longstaffe, where was your sense of decorum and your loyalty to Nicholas?

"We will not quarrel again, my dear, whatever happens. Charlotte, can we never be anything more than friends? Do you still think as you did six months ago?" He paused as if for a reply. Her head drooped lower; but it drooped towards him. "Mine is a lonely life, dear lady. Will you not help to brighten it? By-and-by your young birds will all get wings, and

you, too, may be left alone. Do you not think it would be wise to provide against a forlorn future?"

Again the doctor's eyes twinkled with suppressed mirth. Still his heart had not ceased to thump out of time. He was not out of the wood yet. On this occasion he was cautious not to allude to the paternal duties he might assume. In thinking over his former rebuff the good man always attributed the miscarriage of his suit to that inadvertent allusion to Nicholas.

"But—but every one said—— I—I thought you were going to marry Miss Pilkington."

Then Charlotte began to sob vigorously, and her head bent itself so low that the doctor had no difficulty in kissing her soft brown hair. The lady was too much overcome presumably to resent this amorous manœuvre.

"Confound the chattering crew of old

women! Did they say so? It is not too late, my dear, to send me to her feet. Charlotte, shall I bid for those yellow plaits instead of this?"

The doctor must have been very sure now, for he showered more kisses on the summit of Charlotte's head. By this time she was comfortably nestling her abashed face on his shoulder.

"There, there, my pet, don't cry. I can't have any tears spoil those pretty eyes. So Medea thought you were pale, my damask rose! What, what! dear lady, blushing at your age?"

Charlotte, having gained a little courage, turned round and tried to be saucy.

"But, Dr. Morgan, I am not old at all —hardly older than Miss Pilkington. You must be more than ten years older than me."

He held her away from him, and said, with a pretended frown—

"Don't you be throwing my age in my face, madam, or, by Heaven, I'll take to hair dye. All the more reason, Charlotte, why I should not wait. When shall we be married? You must get rid of all this stuff, you know."

Here the doctor touched the new crape tucks, unknowing, innocent man, that these were the trimmings wherewith his lady-love had consecrated herself to perpetual widowhood!

She quickly cast down her eyes at this reminder.

When Medea returned from her mission, followed by Apollo, ruddy and breathless, the doctor was sitting much closer to Mrs. Longstaffe than medical inquiries alone demanded. Apollo, who had scented the roasting turkey at two fields' distance, had made haste to the feast. Indeed, a strong culinary odour pervaded the house and its vicinity, testifying to Mary Ann Allnut's

efforts to every one except the self-absorbed couple in the drawing-room.

Said Apollo with an aggrieved mien, "I might have had another ten minutes on the ice, after all. The bread sauce isn't made, and the sausages haven't begun to brown." The epicure's disgust was unfeigned. "Mother, is your headache quite gone, and have you been into the kitchen? I bet you've burnt the mince-pies." The bold schoolboy surveyed Charlotte's rosy face with unqualified dismay.

"No, no, young gentleman, the kitchen fire does not account for your mother's restoration to health since you went to church. I've no doubt you will learn my prescription before you reach my years of discretion. Believe me, there are ways more sure and certain of bringing the colour to a lady's face than standing over a kitchen fire."

The doctor, who had risen by this time,

now stood on the hearthrug surveying the youthful party. His hands were in his pockets and he beamed serenely upon them all. This address warned the two elder ones that something unusual was in the wind. Mrs. Charlotte was twisting her wedding-ring in an absent way which boded no good to the recollection of Nicholas.

Medea stood at the back of the sofa, looking from her mother to the doctor, with a vague anxiety stirring in her heart. What did it all mean? — her mother's embarrassment, the doctor's triumphant air?

"Come here, child. You are old enough to see things sensibly, which I doubt if Apollo ever will be."

But Medea stood her ground, not advancing at the doctor's bidding. She was on her guard, for her wide eyes assumed a startled look.

"I have to tell you, Medie, that your

dear mother has agreed to leave Woodbine Cottage. She is going to be my wife very shortly, and you are all coming to live with me and to take care of us both together."

Apollo threw up his cap. "Hurrah! Old Snell *is* a duffer, and Tibbs too, no mistake. They saddled the wrong horse. I say, doctor, you'll let me ride your pony sometimes, and mayn't I drive the gig into Oldford next week to see the races? They all of them said the new carpet and the piano were for Miss Pilkington. My! what a sell when they hear it's only mother. It will be a come down for Miss Olivia. She's got a silk dress and long feathers in her new hat. Doctor, you ain't half smart. She is a *one-er* with her Sunday clothes on. Mother isn't a patch on her."

Medie had drawn a few paces nearer to the doctor, yet still standing with

the length of the hearthrug between them. She stood paralyzed with mingled feelings of anger and grief. No conciliatory speech came from her lips. In the silence that followed Apollo's words the doctor gave a sharp glance in her direction. The evident signs of emotion on her expressive features forewarned him of a scene. This unsuspecting man had never dreamt of this volcano; he had not calculated on the element of her veneration for her dead parent as a possible explosive. Indeed, I cannot say if he was aware of Medea's cherished worship. In any case he could not have measured the strength of her implacability towards the man who would offer to take his place. To him she had always appeared docile and affectionate, and he had speculated frequently why Charlotte was so often at variance with her young daughter.

But it was only in emergencies that

Medea's passionate nature broke loose from restraint. Then her independence of thought asserted itself. In everyday matters she was ready to yield her judgment to others; but let any high duty present itself to her mind and she would cast restraint and prudence to the winds.

It at once became apparent to her that herein Mrs. Longstaffe had grievously erred. She had suffered a slur to fall on their father's memory. It was the part of his children to resent it. Alas! Medea was highly imaginative, unpractical, quixotic, and earnest. She had the qualities of a nature ordained to suffer.

The unexpectedness of this family event made the change on her mother's part appear a double act of treachery. She turned her great eyes with a look of mournful severity from the doctor to Mrs. Longstaffe, who sat blushing beneath her children's notice. Medea drew a long,

sobbing breath, audible to all. With one hand she drew back the ardent Philomela, ready to hurl herself into her mother's arms; for Apollo had explained to this one that they were all about to live with the doctor.

"Mother! mother! can this be true? Oh no; he can't mean that you are going to marry again—to marry *him!*"

She stood like an accusing spirit, one hand stretched out to indicate the unfortunate doctor, who remained mute and abashed. Medea spoke in a heartrending voice, and in an attitude absolutely tragic. Naturally the two chiefly concerned were highly incensed at her tone of superiority. Her evident anguish of mind moved no pity in their hearts at this moment; for their thoughts had reference solely to themselves. The sin with which she would fain have charged them was not brought home to their consciences.

Meeting with no denial beyond her mother's downcast looks, for a moment Medea struggled to check the fiercer flow of words which rose to her lips. Then, perceiving Philomela to advance and take possession of the doctor's hand with a gleeful laugh, she no longer restrained her passionate resentment.

They were all going over to the enemy, and she alone amongst them remained faithful. A frantic jealousy, for the sake of the dead father she scarcely remembered but as an unrighteous judge of childish iniquities, took possession of her. Her loyalty was deep and abiding. She would no longer combat the torrent of bitter words which might sting and offend. Standing apart, white and trembling, she addressed herself to the doctor. Her eyes were wildly dilated; her speech had an emphasis of scorn.

"I see it now, when it is too late. I

understand everything now. This is the reason you were so kind to us all. I thought it was because you loved us for ourselves that you were ready to do things for us always. But all the time it was only to get something for *yourself*. You tried to get us on your side by bribes—yes, by bribes—and you have laid traps for each one of us. *Now* I understand why you were so ready to send me to school at Madame Freudenthal's, and made her take me at less cost than other girls. *Now* I see why you gave Polly his bicycle and cricket-bats, why you allowed Phil to tease you, and always carried presents in your pocket for Flossie. You *know* you never send a bill for our medicine—and we take lots of it. Oh! oh! you are worse than Judas to try us all in that way, and to try and make mother forget. And to think she *can* forget, with father's monument to remind her every Sunday how great and

good he was! Mother, you ought to have been proud and satisfied for all your life long, without expecting anything else, any other happiness. And don't we all love you enough that you want—*him*—to take care of you?"

Then, Medea's fortitude forsaking her, she broke out in sobs and bitter weeping. Turning from them all, she rushed wildly up to her attic chamber, locking the door after her before she flung herself down on the bare boards in a paroxysm of rage and sorrow. Here she could weep her heart out, but they—those others—should not look on her misery and triumph over her in sorrow.

An hour passed away, and Medea still sobbed and wailed. No outside persuasions availed to bring her down to dinner. The Christmas feast, at which the doctor was invited to take a place, was consequently somewhat subdued. Every now and again convulsive sighs and sobs reached the ears

of the assembled party. As the long afternoon passed Medea still refused to be comforted. The doctor at last took his departure, with a half-conscious feeling of defeat, almost persuaded that he had committed some cruelty.

Perhaps Medea did insensibly glory in her woe, which had such an effect on the household. In vain her mother entreated at the key-hole. All prayers and consolations were disregarded, and till the darkness fell sounds of the tempest went on.

Then at last Mrs. Longstaffe perceived that she was endangering her dignity and authority—the latter, alas! a bygone tradition. Of all the members of the family Philomela was most concerned regarding her sister's absence. After the tea-bell had rung and no Medea appeared, the party sat down to table without comment. But Phil took possession of a plate of buttered toast and a large share of apricot jam and dis-

appeared, coming back presently to carry away some tea. The dumb child's signal at a closed door was recognized by all this household. No one ever denied her entry. A little inarticulate sound, something between the coo of a baby and the chirp of a bird, brought Medea to the door of her room. Her eyelids were red and heavy with weeping, while her dark locks were wildly cast about her shoulders in a disarray that was not picturesque.

At the sight of Phil, serenely smiling, she burst out afresh into loud sobs, leaning her head against the whitewashed wall. The blue-eyed one, not at all comprehending the mystery of this sorrow—it could not be because mother was going to take them all to live with the doctor, for that was a plan altogether delightful—saw that Medea needed comfort. She took possession of the cold hand which hung down limp at her sister's side, chafing it with vigorous en-

dearments. These actions proving of little efficacy to stay the flow of tears, she proceeded to hug her closely round the neck, with murmured sounds of an indescribable nature. This wordless sympathy soothed the agitated heroine far more effectually than reasoning speech could have done. The dumb comforting of this ignorant child, who could only guess at something amiss, was balm to the sore heart. Phil had not heard her raging words, her insolent condemnation of the doctor. She knew nothing of her ungoverned anger and jealousy, and was neither able or willing to blame her as all others would be. Beneath the tranquillizing influence of Philomela's endearments Medea became calmer by degrees, and at the urgent instance of the small comforter swallowed some sodden toast and drank some cold tea. By-and-by, when the nine-year-old maiden gathered up the fragments and took her departure, Medea undressed

and got into bed. But she would not say her prayers; and how was it possible to go to sleep with that duty omitted? For hours she pondered the new situation opening before her and meditated on the sacrifice that she had determined it must entail upon her. The hard-won battle for education had, then, been fought in vain. Now beginning in earnest to climb to honour, her mountain had slipped away from her. It was true that she would need to live with the doctor as long as she was subject to her mother, but she would on no account be reconciled to him, or accept any further favours at his hands. She must at once leave the school where he had placed her, and abandon all hope of future distinction. She recalled his jesuitical acts with bitterest tears, reviewing the situation neither philosophically nor dispassionately, but with sentiments of wrath and despair.

Long after the quiet household had gone

to an early rest Medea lay tossing in unquiet thought. If she could only forgive them and say her prayers! But no, she did not forgive them at all, and no dissimulation would cheat her Father in heaven. Medea's mind was devoutly coloured from earliest childhood, and the truth was in her from her birth.

She had left her door ajar in order to hear the footsteps come upstairs. A pang had gone through her heart when the mother's door below her room closed audibly. She heard the kitchen clock strike eleven, then twelve, and still no comfort visited her. Her heart was hard, and the spirit of forgiveness was far from her.

Dared she even to close her eyes without fulfilling the observance of nightly thanksgiving? Through the curtainless window the stars twinkled merrily, unmindful of any human woe. Medea's chamber looked north-west, and she saw that the Great

Bear had climbed high. She knew something about astronomy now, but the science was cold consolation. Those far-off worlds were too remote to know aught of her grief. She wanted something near and tangible. She craved some sympathy, some help, and there was none. Every one was happy, she said; no one was loyal to dead people, or remembered with gratitude what others had done for them. Again the sensitive passionate face was buried beneath the clothes as Medea stifled convulsive sobs. When the fit subsided at last it seemed to her fancy that the door was creaking. She raised her head and peered through the darkness. She could see nothing.

"Polly, is that you?" she said aloud in a hoarse voice, such as comes after prolonged weeping.

No answer for a second. Then, ah! what a sweet answer. A pair of soft arms round her neck. Oh, the blessedness of

loving arms encircling us! Some one now knelt beside Medea's little bed, straining her with fond embraces.

"Oh, mother! mother!" She turned to the soft breast with deep joy in her final sob.

"Medie, it breaks my heart to hear you cry so, to know that you are unhappy. Oh! oh! my heart is torn in two! What shall I do?"

Mother and daughter, locked in a fond embrace, mingled their tears for awhile. Medea's were no longer hot and bitter. During this soft rain a mitigation of pain was perceptible to herself. In the darkness she drew the sleek head down on the pillow, patting it fondly. It was seldom Charlotte who caressed. She was one of those women made to be a recipient. Not that she demanded it, but she was so helpless—perhaps foolish.

Neither now could see the other's face, which naturally helped the unbosoming.

We can take off our clothes physically and morally in the dark.

"Mother, in my heart I am sorry I said those things to *him*, though I can never tell him so. Mamsey darling, say that you do not love him better than us."

Medea touched the right chord at last. Oh! Mrs. Longstaffe, think of that poor ill-used doctor.

"No, no—a thousand times no. My sweetest child, how could I do so? I thought only of your happiness; he can do so much for you all. But, Medie, you may be right. Perhaps it would be better if I did not marry again."

Foolish Charlotte sobbed out her renunciation weakly. She had previously revolted at the censor-like tone assumed by her young daughter, but this appeal to her maternal affection left her incapable of further contest. For a little while Medea remained silent. In the stillness her

mother's sobs became louder. Charlotte was secretly laying a charge against cruel fate.

"Get into bed, mother; you are shivering. Why, your feet are bare!" A long sigh followed from the daughter. "Ah, I see how it is. You really must have some one to look after you and take care of you when we are away. Sometimes you seem like a person that has never quite grown up. You nearly always have to be told what is best to do—don't you, mother? Ah, do not cry. My own mother, I did not want to grieve you. Perhaps if you had told me something about it sooner it would not have hurt me so much to think that some one else could take our father's place. Don't you see, Dr. Morgan will be our step-father? Oh, oh! Had you *no* idea of it before? You *must* have known he was going to ask you."

You see, Medea was not quite so igno-

rant of love matters as to suppose that no premonitory symptoms had given warning of the offer. She almost held her mother culpable for not having divulged such signs. Mary Ann Allnut had enlightened this young person as to the rules of "keeping company" in her own state of life, and it was credible that in a superior rank some code of advances must be recognized.

Mrs. Longstaffe debated whether truthfulness demanded of her a confession of the doctor's former attempt, for it could hardly be called an avowal. Then this wily lady decided to ignore the past episode, opening another chapter very diplomatically.

"I thought it was Miss Pilkington he—he liked."

The clock below struck one and two and three before this pair had discussed all the bearings of the matter. Most inconsistently Mrs. Longstaffe now took the part

of education, imploring Medea not to abandon her own interests or to so grievously wound the doctor's feelings. By this time the girl's pillow was quite dry, and she had begun to consider ruefully the necessity of laying aside her Euclid.

At last there came a lull in the conversation. Sleep appeared imperative.

Medea's bed being small, she had gone to the wall literally as well as figuratively. Charlotte occupied the centre and was happy, knowing it was no longer required of her to renounce her suitor. At last she made an effort to move.

"Must you go, darling mother? Your bed will be so cold, and I really am quite comfortable. Good-night, then. Remember, you have promised *it* shall be when I am away. Good night, good night.'

As you may presume, this very emphatic "*it*" signified the marriage ceremony.

The hot blood mounted to Charlotte's face in the darkness beneath Medea's kisses. They seemed a reproach to her now; for the child had come round to giving a tacit consent to the union.

Having listened to her mother's retreating footsteps till the door beneath closed softly, Medea rose from her warm nest, and, kneeling devoutly on the bare boards, reverently said her prayers.

"As we forgive them that trespass against us," she repeated emphatically, as she called to mind the doctor's perfidy.

BOOK THE SECOND.

CHAPTER I.

MIXED BISCUITS.

In Flatshire the sanctity of heritage is a dead letter—not an uncommon manifestation of forgetfulness nowadays. Our consciences awake in other directions, of course, and we are duly sensible of the claims of Humanity—with a very large H—not the little beggarly fraction of mankind that dwells in rural ways, and has a claim upon us for having served our individual forefathers for generations. Our charity and duty is more catholic in these days, and we enlarge our cosmopolitan minds from year to year with the conviction that our breadth of feeling is a great gain.

In Flatshire the lords of the soil are for the greater part debtors to alien cultivators, alien philanthropists, and alien pheasant breeders. The landed proprietors of this county let their places—most of them of necessity, a few of them out of greed—for Flatshire manors command a high price in the sporting markets. They are sought out of city men and marked by wealthy colonists. In this way it has come to pass that ancestral acres are shot over by *parvenus* of trade, and shoddy gentlemen hang up their hats on Tudor walls. But though the pockets of city merchants maintain provincial trade, these foreign tenants never become popular. Their Christmas doles of beef may be larger than the aristocratic measure, their blankets and flannel petticoats of the most superior quality, but yet the givers are regarded by peasant minds, or by the small dealers in adjacent towns, as so much material for extortion

and robbery. There is an unwritten law of universal acceptance that a stranger in the land must be fleeced.

Stockbrokers and merchants of these times have a certain compensation. They enjoy the prestige of being men of mark in the sporting world, with far greater relish than the renown of business successes.

In the vicinity of Lakenham three principal properties were in the hands of strangers. Bexham, a grand old Elizabethan mansion, with thousands of surrounding acres attached, was rented by a manufacturer from the north. Its owners, the Lee-Milliners, preferred to waste their substance in Bohemian living in Paris and at foreign watering-places to retrenching aught of their traditional state at home. Meanwhile the canny Scotchman, Mr. Donald Nichol, kept the moth and rust at bay in the lofty rooms, breeding and selling pheasants without loss, the sport thrown in. But his

guineas did not flow into the coffers of local dealers. He cut down the gardeners and shut up the peach-houses, importing his groceries from wholesale Glasgow houses. There was but a small margin of profit made out of him in Bedmondstone. As to his wife's shawls and his daughters' gowns, malice said that nothing in such vile taste could proceed from anywhere but his own looms.

Elsmore Park, nearer to Oldford than to Lakenham, was the Earl of Wrexham's seat. From the hour of his majority, old people in the county had shaken their heads over the naughty ways of this young man. In consequence of his perilous proximity to a racing capital, he had been led into a labyrinth of misfortunes. Not that he was cowardly enough to shirk the blame of calamity, or to lay to the charge of others the series of disasters which had befallen him. Though his young lordship

had plunged so heavily in the early days of his succession to the title, he had since been under constraint to diminish his household as well as his stud. Now a stranger reigned in his stead at the Park, though he declared that it was only a temporary suspension of hospitality and splendour.

Many were of opinion that he really would begin the old game again when he had paid off his debts. Certainly, in the evil days that had visited him, Lord Wrexham demeaned himself with spirit—with effrontery, some wiseacres said. He showed a bold face to his own county, taking up his residence in a dilapidated dower house at the very gates of his own park. There he was still within hail of the empty stables, within sight of the well-beloved heath.

What concerned Lakenham yet more nearly than these remoter properties was the third large demesne—an estate belong-

ing to the Charteris family. The acres appertaining to Lakenham Hall adjoined the village green, encircling it with woods and park land. When it was made known that the family mansion, so long untenanted, was to be let, the village held itself aggrieved. Sir Lionel Charteris had been absent for so many years, that the dwellers in the parish considered the estate in part public property. Such strangers as came down from London to view the house and territory were inspected at Malham station in an aggressive manner. But many came and went unsatisfied. The shooting was excellent and the place desirable in many ways, only Sir Lionel resolutely refused to be troubled with refurnishing or decorating, and the condition of the house was deplorable. At length the advent of a certain Mr. McCracken, concerning whose business or occupation report was vague, decided matters. Lakenham parishioners considered

they were called upon to endure a breach of privilege. The right of way through the park, with the advantages of nutting, picnicing, and so forth, were things of the past, when the rusty gates creaked backwards to receive the new-comer, bristling with importance. In earlier years the extensive shrubberies and pleasure-grounds had been favourite resorts of the Longstaffe children. Many a noisy tea and game of romps had roused the echoes in the hollows of park-land in times before the doctor's intentions became known. That party was grown up and dispersed now. It had waxed beyond the age of hide-and-seek and hunt-the-hare, so that any difference made by the appearance of hen-coops and the introduction of officious gamekeepers could not affect the pleasure of Dr. Morgan's household.

The renovating of the big house, the works of plastering, slating, papering, and

furnishing, were matters of absorbing interest to people, small and of no reputation, nowise therewith concerned. The charwomen who were admitted during a subsequent season of purification were diligently cross-questioned. Such important alterations, such extensive preparations, argued the approach of a family accustomed to genteel living, whispered Lakenham ladies, discussing the probable dissipations that might come.

They awoke to the conviction that there was room for amendment in the social observances enacted in the vicinity. In many respects they were woefully behind the times, having no big house to set any example of gentility. After a couple of highly varnished carriages and a string of six horses had passed from the station, Mr. McCracken himself arrived, with due pomp and ceremony. It was on a Saturday that he took possession of the Hall, and

the following morning he appeared at the church in the Charteris pew—a sanctuary railed off from the rest of the congregation. The tip of a white feather was observed above the rod which supported red moreen curtains. This waggish plume vastly excited the curiosity of some churchgoers not as devout as Mr. Pilkington's ministrations demanded they should be. But nothing more was seen of this second worshipper, who came and went by the private door admitting from the church to the Hall grounds. Mr. McCracken himself had proved a sad disappointment to the ladies, who rustled into church in best silks and summer bonnets. Mrs. Hall, the widow of Dr. Morgan's predecessor, a tall, active-minded lady of seventy, who scorned spectacles and prided herself equally on her straight back and mental clear-sightedness, pronounced her verdict on the newcomer with asperity.

"A very ordinary-looking man, to be sure, doctor. Put him behind a counter with an apron and bib, and he'd look a respectable grocer. Grocers do mostly have whitey-brown complexions and ginger-coloured hair. The family arms ought to be a pair of scales and a double Gloucester. He's running into a line of business which he don't understand. Don't you tell me his watch-chain and satin stock will help him to play the gentleman."

This penetrating lady was gratified beyond measure when it was ultimately proved that Joseph McCracken, Esq., was one and the same as the chief of a noted biscuit factory down Lambeth way. In Lakenham village there were two grocers and general dealers' shops, but unfortunately these failed to supply the conclusive evidence of the new-comer's identity. On the next market day in Bedmondstone there

was an extraordinary run on a certain class of biscuits. The grocers were puzzled to receive the custom of conservative ladies who baked their fancy bread-stuff and sweet cakes at home.

All the tins whereon were emblazoned in two-inch letters the name of the favoured firm were bought up eagerly. Those who yearned to verify the reports concerning the trade of the new tenant found these certificates of fame highly satisfactory. "Joseph McCracken & Co., Fancy Biscuit Manufacturers, Wholesale Dealers and Exporters, St. Swithin's, Lambeth," decided the matter.

"Well, to be sure," said little Miss Dormer, whose daily educational duties had not permitted her to journey to Bedmondstone in person on this exciting quest;—"well, to be sure; he's nothing better than a tradesman that may say 'thank you' for our custom."

She nibbled gingerly with her front teeth, which were the only reliable ones left to her, at the crisp little cake offered to her, as though there were a certain amount of risk to her cherished gentility in the eating of it.

Miss Dormer, who at this time acted in the capacity of daily governess to the children at Furness Hill, had been invited by Mrs. Parsons to remain to tea. This lady was one of the inquiring dames who had purchased a tin of McCracken's biscuits. The unburdening of her mind on her return from the town was an exquisite satisfaction.

"Ay, yes, Miss Dormer. Old Mrs. Hall she were in the right to call him an interloper, for he ain't the true gentleman, let him carry himself as he may. There's them in the world as 'ull let a carriage and pair throw dust in their eyes o' purpose not to see the trade mark under a coat of

arms. It's a poor time of day to live to when our old fam'lies takes to letting of bakers occupy their seats at church, and 'tis a wonder as the dead don't rise from their vaults to cry shame on them."

Here Mrs. Parsons having to take breath, Miss Dormer took occasion to remark, with much emphasis—

"Indeed, Mrs. Parsons, there are strange up and downs in this world, as I can tell better than most."

"Yes," said the farmer's wife, started once more, "it do seem contrary to the ways of Providence, as we're told is just, to see a lady like you, as was brought up genteel and pious, earning her humble living, while such as him, as I'll be bound for it was cradled in flour sacks and christened in chapel, goes riding to church like a lord. David he said as he never see the righteous forsaken, or his seed begging their bread; but there, I ain't much

opinion of David's wisdom, though he is in Scripture."

Miss Dormer made a little gesture of demur at the word "begging."

Mrs. Parsons went on, "Why, bless you, the man wouldn't know the world if he was to come back to it. Not as I'm anyways saying that these biscuits ain't nice and crisp enough, as needs be—with good butter in 'em, I'll warrant. Try another sort; one of them with the candy I can recommend to you, Miss Dormer. Mr. Cloves he said as McCracken's was out and out the best mixed biscuits in England for the money, and that tons of 'em was sent to the colonies. How them niggers can afford to eat them at this price wholly beats me. But, as I was going to say—— Eliza love, go upstairs and fetch my key-basket that is on the chest of drawers in the spare chamber; leastways, if it ain't there, it will be on the landing outside the

linen closet. Katie, my dear, Miss Dormer is ready for another cup of tea, if you fetch a jug of cream from the dairy. You'll excuse me calling the servant girls from the washhouse, Miss Dormer, it being Wednesday night, when they're mangling." Having disposed of the children, Mrs. Parsons lowered her voice to a confidential pitch. "Parsons he is agent to Sir Lionel, Miss Dormer, and you know as we rent his biggest farm. My man's a born fool. Of course, there's a reg'lar salary for looking after woods and cottages and paying of men on the estate, which comes in handy, no doubt; but I'll snap my fingers at the agency if this new tenant gives himself these my-lording airs or lets rabbits get troublesome. The salary it ain't worth any bother, or the demeaning of ourselves to eat humble pie, which I never was one to do. But Parsons he ain't got no spirit. Why, he was snivelling

and crawling at my feet for a word when we was courting. Now, if he's a mind to sing small to a man as is in the confectionery line, I'll let him have a bit of my mind. He's been sent for an hour since from the Hall, like any common 'fetch-and-carry man' to this McCracken's bidding. I'm not going to deny that Parsons he did come home this afternoon a bit 'market merry,' and nigh drove the gig agen the gate. There's no telling what foolishness he won't give into to-night to a biscuit man, as knows naught of the rights of things or the ways of gentry."

At this moment the keys and cream simultaneously appeared at different doors. Mrs. Parsons resumed the perpendicular, and Miss Dormer seized the opportunity to lift up her feeble pipe, a chance seldom obtained in the presence of her employer.

"Another lump of sugar—thank you. Your tea is delectable, always quite delec-

table, Mrs. Parsons. Ah, well, as Mr. Pilkington tells us, the ways of Providence are an enigma to us poor earth-worms. To think of my dear lamented father, that was a beneficed clergyman of the Church of England in this very county, leaving his orphan child penniless, to earn a maintenance by her own labours. I do not murmur at the mysterious operations of the Almighty. I am thankful to say it is a respectable employment whereunto I am called. In my humble endeavours to increase the talents of budding minds, I earnestly struggle to fulfil the dictates of duty. The task allotted to me is a noble one." Miss Dormer smiled sweetly, heaving a gentle sigh. The lady was admitted on all sides to have a truly pious mind, which was an unfailing source of employment and profit to her.

With regard to her many acquirements, she prided herself specially on her know-

ledge of her own language, taking in spelling, grammar, the choice of words, and literary criticism. Miss Dormer might possibly have labelled herself philologist, had she ever happened to come across such a scientific word. She considered that it was her mission to reform the vulgar expressions and native errors of those entrusted to her for instruction. Having been brought up, as every one knew, in great refinement of circumstance, her words were euphonious and pleasant to hear. It was her chief endeavour to avoid the coarse and every-day expressions of the multitude. Her speech certified, in the eyes of the more ambitious and most ignorant farmers' wives, her ability to deal with the rough ways and provincial errors of their children. Thus, Miss Dormer's daily tuition at a house was supposed to reflect a superior air of gentility upon all the members of the family. All people in and about

Lakenham were kind, if not deferential, towards the prim little governess, those who were unable to recognize the merits of her feeble accomplishments giving due meed of honour to her kind heart.

CHAPTER II.

THREADS OF HISTORY.

Within a few days of Mr. McCracken's appearance at church, the rector, incited thereto by Olivia, left his card at the Hall. He was received at the door by a portly butler, who appeared as though he had seen many good days, and a gorgeous functionary in yellow plush breeches, who surveyed the Rev. Edward's long coat-tails most superciliously. Such splendour of livery even the Lee-Milliners in their most affluent days had never approached. Mr. McCracken was not at home. He had, in fact, taken the early train to town that morning in order to meet a large

consignment of damaged flour at Lambeth. Truth does not always out, and the best advertised biscuits know adulteration as well as other things. As Mr. Pilkington passed the drawing-room windows on the return journey, the red damask draperies caught his eye; also life-sized marble statues, which, in accordance with Clapham customs, the traditions best known of the McCrackens, were promoted to the honour of the public gaze in the window. The showy magnificence of interior decorations conveyed itself to Mr. Pilkington's understanding. For a moment, as he turned the corner of the house, he glanced backwards towards the library window, and obtained a glimpse of a golden head bent over a book, quite evidently a feminine head.

This piece of news conveyed small comfort or information to Miss Pilkington. She was chagrined to glean no further

particulars concerning Mr. McCracken's person or family. She had pricked up her ears at the declaration that he was a widower. Yet might there not be a tribe of young masters and misses to set against this hopeful circumstance? Much conflicting testimony was offered to her, and Olivia was chary of dealing with speculation. Her mind was not immediately set at rest, as two wet Sundays ensued, and the Hall pew remained empty. As a matter of course Olivia had been setting her matrimonial weapons in order, and planning her line of attack with all the skill of a veteran campaigner.

The first glimpse of the new neighbour had not vouched much for his personal attributes. He was certainly fat, and of a coarse-grained white complexion, with a bald head and fringe of reddish beard. He was hardly entitled to admiration. Yet this fair one with the golden locks com-

forted herself with some quotation about "the guinea's stamp." Olivia quoted poetry and Scripture equally to her purpose, like a certain historical personage.

This lady, in the lapse of ten years, since we first heard of her ogling Dr. Morgan over his prescriptions, had managed to establish herself a fixture at the rectory. After yearly visits, prolonged by degrees from two months to four, and from four to six, Olivia discovered that it was not worth while going away at all. She made an elaborate explanation of the advantages to be derived from a joint establishment. So minute were the advantages in her statement, that Mr. Pilkington failed to see them clearly. It was not until this wily lady threw in as a sentimental make-weight the desolation of her solitary existence in her cottage at Bath that the good man yielded.

Though at that time considerably on

the wrong side of thirty, Olivia was still skittish, and her juvenile costumes and playful demeanour persuaded the unsophisticated Edward, but a year her senior, that she needed a masculine protector. He was tolerant of all sins and shortcomings except his own, so that the lady was safe to carry on her manœuvres as she listed. The benefit derived from her supervision of the rector's establishment was highly questionable. Her brother's linen was an open disgrace in the sight of the parish. Those garments, so lamentably frayed at the waistbands, could not be accounted for by the traditional hair shirt. Even the devout believers in that penitential garb knew better than to suggest such an excuse for Olivia's neglect of her needle. And certainly Mr. Pilkington's lean condition and pallid hue was well accounted for by a scant dietary. The ladies, who knew to a fraction the amount

of the weekly bills at the rectory, looked very stern when Olivia made her moan over "dear Edward's" vegetarian principles and ascetic regimen. The lady was fairly suspected of parsimonious housekeeping, and the wrath of female parishioners made angry inquisition regarding new gowns or extra flounces suspected of having been screwed out of the housekeeping funds.

"An' only to think as it's our tithes as help to dress her up so fine," objected Mrs. Parsons, most reasonably, as she glanced down at her own dyed merino.

To outward seeming the fair siren looked much as of yore. Her plaits were still a decorative cornice to the head-piece. They had not seceded before the dictum of a later fashion, as had her garments. The abundant locks retained their golden hue faithfully, not paling their splendour before advancing years. An early sin had been

persisted in, and at this time an auricomous fluid was fairly suspected. Other rules of fashion Olivia had faithfully followed from her youth up. When jerseys, about this date, first came into vogue, Olivia was promptly obedient to the dictates of buttonless bodies, enduring semi-strangulation with daily renewals of fortitude. At this time even that graceful willow wand, Miss McCracken, was not more studiously "tied back" about the knees. This attention to compression and strings made sad revelations concerning Miss Pilkington's natural form, not affording the same amount of pleasure to the public eye as did the proportions of the more youthful and elegant lady at the Hall.

Of course it had been the tip of Miss McCracken's feather which had advertised a lady's presence in the Charteris pew. She proved to be her father's only "encumbrance," as Miss Pilkington expressed

it in course of a confidential conversation with Miss Bragge.

In due course of time this unlucky epithet was of course conveyed to Miss McCracken's own ears.

At the epoch of this young lady's arrival at Lakenham, she was about one and twenty, and not fully emancipated from the control of an elderly lady, otherwise a *chaperone*, the widow of a distinguished naval officer, who kindly undertook the charge of the motherless daughters of the nobility and gentry, at a rate of remuneration corresponding to her numerous certificates. Mrs. Fraser's rule did not, however, long survive the move to Lakenham, for Miss McCracken gave this lady to understand that she now purposed to take the helm of government herself. The aforesaid "encumbrance" turned out, not only to be attractive, but to have an energetic mind devoted to all

forms of pleasure from flirtation to new bonnets. In her surprising fashionable raiment she proved an element of interest to Lakenham church-goers, which not all Mr. Pilkington's fervent discourses concerning the sinfulness of the world, flesh, and devil could disannul. Neither was the young lady disposed to hide her pretty person and smart costumes behind the red moreen curtains. As she was too short to see over them, this ugly screen was entirely done away with before her second appearance in public. Hereafter she shone in the congregation as a fixed star. In a neighbourhood which offered few lighter dissipations, church-going became one of her weekly distractions.

Beauty was much to be desired amidst the stolid bucolic faces of strapping wenches from farm kitchens, and of the growing families of small tradesmen. Mrs. Dobbs, the butcher's wife, rosy and apoplectic,

with her progeny of ten, equally rosy though not yet apoplectic, and a sprinkling of minor dealers not of the chapel faction, were scattered about the aisles. Somewhat apart, as of superior standing, the Parsons family from Furness Hill occupied a big square box. Another smaller compartment of the same shape was allotted to Mrs. Hall, who was graciously pleased to admit Miss Dormer to the comfort of this well-cushioned sanctuary. Miss Pilkington, screened from the vulgar gaze in the shelter of a recess, accompanied the singing of the school-children on the harmonium.

Lastly, amongst notabilities there was our old friend Dr. Morgan and his comely little wife. Though two of Mrs. Morgan's children had spread their wings, she smiled over her Prayer-book with the serenity of a happy woman. In these days her eyes, unaccustomed to

tears, shone brightly, and her dimples were yet more apparent. At the time of the McCracken advent, Medea, her eldest born, was acting as *dame de compagnie* to a young German countess residing in the minute Grand Duchy of Hornhausen. Medea was now in her twenty-fifth year. It is indeed a pity that my tale does not admit of her being presented to you as a more youthful heroine; but those who prefer a light-hearted frivolous maiden, or a volatile and sprightly spirit, are at liberty to adopt my much-admired Rachel or the veteran campaigner Olivia, as the objects of their admiration. Young ladies may take my word for it that no flagrant performances or atrocious plottings shall render them unfit associates for their leisure hours.

Apollo had now attained the years of manhood, a matter difficult to credit if

nature had not so kindly endowed him with a beautiful silken moustache. His boyish levity and aptitude for joking and mimicry might for ever have disqualified him as a lover but for this manly attribute. Olivia sighed when she looked at it. Alas! alas! the years had rolled on. Young ladies, one and all, adored Apollo Longstaffe, and garrison hacks forgot that he was ineligible when he rested his blue eyes upon them, or steered them through the mazy waltz in his strong arms. He was a soldier, of course. His intentions had always pointed that way. Thus, he might as well have been a Maurice. A very smart young officer, believe me, had developed from the rude schoolboy with whom you were formerly acquainted. He was immensely popular, and, strange to say, no one grudged him his favour. Apollo had a firm belief in his own good luck, which sometimes goes

a long way towards ensuring it. He would never fail for want of confidence.

Unwittingly I have cast a slur on Philomela's fair head in saying there was nothing young or attractive in Lakenham church. Her eyes were still blue as the flowers she loved so well. People, for want of a better term, called the dumb girl "interesting." At church she was usually so devout, with looks bent prayerfully down, that you might have passed her by as inanimate or insignificant. But at home and in her daily life she was a bright, intelligent companion, clever with her fingers in work of all kinds, and answering to a word or look with the readiest intuition. Her finger language was explicit even to Mrs. Morgan. With the rare patience of mother-love, even she, the slowest of learners, had accomplished speaking and interpreting by signs. The good doctor sometimes marvelled silently

over Charlotte's painstaking mastery of such difficulties. He himself never became more than an indifferent talker on his hands, managing to help out his meaning with nods and pantomimic signs. Ah, my dear doctor, mother-love might well be beyond your comprehension, for, being the nearest thing we know to God's love, it passeth all understanding. Phil would frequently, with soft smiles, gently smite the fat little fingers which spelt amiss, slowly telling out the letters correctly on her own beautiful hands without raising a blush on Charlotte's face. It had come to pass in the course of years that the bitterness towards learning had somewhat faded from this lady's mind. Her flock, with the exception of Medea, had none of them gone astray after strange gods of wisdom. They had dealt tenderly with her, proving themselves no inheritors of divine sparks. It was Flossie who was chief ignoramus

of the brood. Now she was a slim maiden of sixteen, residing at a Parisian boarding-school, where she pursued no solid attainments, but spent her days in acquiring the airs and graces which beauty is entitled to wear. Floss was sure that an elegant carriage of head and shoulders, a coquettish smile, and a consummate taste in dress, might compensate for the lack of knowledge and book-lore. What did it matter if her spelling was imperfect? It was easy enough to write indefinitely and illegibly. If in future addition did vex her soul, she would invest in a ready-reckoner. Dictionaries and calculations are easily come by, but not so a perfect way of dancing and an ability to blend colours in millinery. These, we know, are talents without price.

Flossie was a precocious young person, who had early opened her little ears to Miss Pilkington's utterances. She held

fast to the conviction that the admiration of men was a greater gain than knowledge. What masculine honour was there for blue-stockings? Favour was not deceitful, and beauty was not vain, in spite of Solomon's dictum.

It was some little time before Lakenham realized the magnitude of Mr. McCracken's hopes in migrating to Flatshire—namely, that he aspired to float with county society —the cream of it, too. He had little idea what a very dull stream this was.

As a rule, the tenants who hired halls or mansions on long or short leases recognized their position as aliens in the land, importing their guests when they required any from their native pavement. In consequence of this well-established custom, the county was slow to detect any signs of ambition on the part of the new-comer. The renovation of Lakenham Hall and its magnificent furnishing signified money of

course, but speculations regarding Mr. McCracken did not go so far as to lay the sin of ambition to his charge. A man of large means, taking a country house on a lease of fourteen years, naturally considered it worth his while to make his residence pleasant and comfortable. The notorious biscuit-maker, whose tins travelled to every country between the poles, was certainly entitled to damask and ebony, with well-oiled springs and faultless castors, while a French *chef* every one knew was the inevitable accompaniment of wealth.

But Mr. McCracken had entered the arena of country life with a very different notion to that of being comfortable. Indeed, he was not sure at all but that he and comfort might have dissolved partnership for evermore when he abandoned the Clapham level. The path to any distinction was always a prickly one, and in turning aside from the commonplace well-

tracked highway of civic dignities, it might be that he had forsaken substance for shadow.

But this gentleman only looked furtively back the once he had moved his plough. Cæsar was ambitious, as Mr. McCracken very well knew, having declaimed the fact frequently at city banquets when called upon to vilify some unpopular minister who was leading his country to destruction; but he did not lay the fate of that noble predecessor to heart. He beheld what he considered a sea of glory spread before him, and ventured his little bladder upon it.

But this man was one who liked to get his money's worth, and in the present case his lavish expenditure demanded a social recognition of his appearance in the county. He had entered with a dash, such as none could fail to see, and was quite ready to behave handsomely to Flatshire in the way

of subscriptions and entertainments, if it gave him a mere foothold on a platform higher than he had known, a bowing acquaintance with lords and squires. His showy furniture, his magnificent equipages, and handsome silver-decorated harness, he felt sure demanded the attention of county magnates and the dropping of their wives' cards.

To his dismay very few pasteboards, and those altogether beneath consideration, were forthcoming. Amongst these Mrs. Morgan's were not to be found. This lady felt herself under no constraint to call on the new arrivals. In the lapse of years the doctor's wife had disfranchised herself of social obligations. As Mrs. Longstaffe, only the lesser half of the late rector, her visiting list had never included any great folks of the vicinity. She did not remind herself that she was a Godbold, and Aunt Dorothea had ceased to recall

that fact to her remembrance. She had no yearnings for distinction, or the patronage of fine folks. Her ambition had finally been laid up in lavender, with a grey silk gown, on the day that saw her united to the doctor. No necessity for such attire, or no stirring influence had demanded the unfolding of those locked-up possessions since that occasion. And though Miss Pilkington spoke with bated breath of dinner-parties which would be given at the Hall, no tremor of anticipation fluttered a response in Mrs. Morgan's breast.

Medea had some years ago, during one of her short holidays, brought to light some visiting cards, used in her mother's younger days. She had made merry over the highly glazed pasteboards and flourishing capitals which had been fashionable at the era of her birth. Even in the days of Nicholas's supremacy these had been little in demand, and the gradual desuetude of

card-leaving during her widowhood had not occasioned any printing of the new name when the old one was no longer serviceable. The modest dwellers in Lakenham with whom Mrs. Morgan exchanged civilities were Mrs. Hall, who lived in a one-storied cottage and kept a maid-of-all-work; Miss Dormer, who occupied rooms over the Post-office, and thereby gleaned a considerable amount of information regarding the parish events; and a certain Mrs. Kitto, a retired linendraper's wife, not acknowledged within the pale of gentility. But Mrs. Kitto, being an invalid, required the constant attention of Dr. Morgan, and the doctor's wife was quite willing to maintain friendly relations with a person who was so very kind to Philomela. Of course Mrs. Parsons, of Furness Hill, and the owners of outlying farms, bordering the neighbouring parish of Woolston, were on terms of recognition with their late rector's

wife; but they did not look for any acknowledgment of their status by a visiting-card or invitation to tea. Lakenham was a primitive place in its ways so far, and the formalities of higher civilization were not expected of those who were neighbourly.

I cannot deny that occasionally, reflecting on the position of her august relatives on the other side of the county, Mrs. Morgan suffered twinges of conscience. As her children grew up, she became impressed with the idea that she had neglected her duty by failing to instruct them in the usages of good society. She had an uneasy notion that by her second marriage she had not fulfilled the obligations of good birth, and that the Godbold clan, which she secretly prayed she might not come in contact with, might find occasion to marvel at her forgetfulness of her youthful training and social traditions she had been bred

to believe in. In one of these penitential moods, about this epoch, the doctor came home one evening and found his wife frowning over her tea equipage. The tea-pot, cream-jug, and sugar-basin were real silver, and Mary Ann Allnut had faithfully done her duty by their polishing. What now?

"John, it is the fashion in these days for people to dine late. I have been thinking we might begin to change our old-fashioned ways before Medic comes home. And Polly will be here at Christmas, and the dear boy likes things nice and comfortable."

The doctor paused in the act of unwinding a voluminous comforter, the work of Philomela's industrious hands. He looked across the well-spread table, on which were flowers and dainty dishes of cut-glass and old china, assuming an air of comic dismay. Philomela, exemplary housekeeper, was carefully measuring out tea from the old

tortoiseshell caddy. She glanced sharply at the pair, as if to mark what was under discussion. The doctor, quickly recovering himself, closed amicably with his wife's unlooked-for proposition.

"Just as you please, Charlotte. You know I always leave these domestic matters in your hands. By the way, I forgot some time ago to mention to you that Miss Pilkington had been remarking on our old-fashioned practices. I believe Edward Pilkington sits down to a cauliflower and a biscuit in dress clothes every night."

Charlotte tossed her head and showed suddenly that she had a backbone. The doctor continued to unwind the purple scarf with a well-simulated equanimity of manner.

"Miss Pilkington indeed! And pray what right has she to discuss our household affairs with you? There's no end to her inquisitive prying. I am ashamed of you,

John, giving her a handle against your own wife."

Phil's eyes were full of wicked laughter as the doctor telegraphed "Miss Pilkington." Olivia's tactics always provoked her mirth. Having got the thin edge of his wedge in, Dr. Morgan proceeded to press the matter precisely as if he had taken the initiative.

"I really wonder you never thought of it before. It's high time, wife, that we began to adopt the ways of modern folks. Of course, now, there's no reason why you should not call at the Hall. Invite the McCrackens to dinner, and let them taste our *entrées*. No doubt they will be a wholesome variety. Mrs. Jaggers may be stimulated to rival that smart French gentleman in the paper cap who was calling out plaintively for sweetbreads at Dobb's shop as I came by."

Meanwhile the doctor had got himself

into his big chair, and was adding lump after lump of sugar to the cup of tea handed to him by Phil. The girl waited upon him with fond affection, bringing his slippers from the fender, placing toast at his elbow, and carving ham at the side-board. Her mute ways were pretty and touching, while her swift interpretation of every sign or look gave evidence of a rare intelligence.

"Well, to be sure! And Mary Ann Allnut, poor creature, to do the waiting at table, and the washing up of plates at nine o'clock at night. She'd give warning, I know she would, after twenty years of service. A nice idea of yours, doctor! Late dinner indeed—and *entrées!* Not while I'm head of this house. I dare say you would like all manner of rubbishy French food, made out of frogs and creeping things, instead of good legs and ribs. Bottled coxcombs and snails and sauces

are what you want, are they? You'd end in apoplexy or liver complaint."

This was naturally the conclusion of suggestions regarding an alteration in the dinner hour, and to the end of his life the doctor remained under the imputation of having proposed a change. He was even held up to Mrs. Jagger's ridicule, which was hard, you will allow, on an innocent man.

CHAPTER III.

AMBITION.

It was not long before Mr. McCracken had the half-dozen families of distinction, those of a station above the interlopers, namely the residents in the country, who were owners also, at his finger ends. And none of them called.

The Braggses and the Nichols, both tenants, were nothing to him, however imposing their equipages, as long as Lord Wrexham, driving about the roads in a ramshackle old dog-cart, passed him by without any acknowledgment.

The Ringroses, a family of ancient degree, which gave the law to West

Flatshire, ignored his presence at Lakenham Hall, the property of their once familiar friend, Sir Lionel Charteris.

The Hungerfords, poor according to report, yet proud according to appearance, looked over the biscuit-maker's head. Even the Proteus family tarried, though none could say they were proud.

But so many strangers came and went in this country, that it made not a pin's head of difference if one place more was let. Residents hardly paused to inquire "Who has taken it?" if no special qualification of title or connection recommended the new-comer.

None, however, divined the stern stuff of which Mr. McCracken's ambition was made, seeing a little fat man of vulgar aspect. Ambition ought always to advertise itself in attractive guise.

It is true that the officers from Bedmondstone depôt drove over in detachments

to leave their cards at Lakenham. They knew well the good report of covers there. Moreover, Miss McCracken was reputed young and fair, in addition to being an heiress.

Neighbouring clergy paid their respects duly. The cloth walked or rode, or conveyed its wife, if it had one, to Lakenham in a species of covered waggonette. This was a description of vehicle much affected by the less wealthy Flatshire residents. Frequently it would have a horse newly taken from the fields between the shafts, with a Jehu of primitive type with tarnished buttons. He probably had sped the plough in the fore part of the day behind the same quadruped; for rectors farmed their glebe lands diligently hereabouts.

The Nichols from Bexham likewise hastened to pay their respects. Strangers, being all in the same category as regarded the county folks, usually fraternized.

The wary old Donald Nichol had gleaned authentic information of Mr. McCracken's flourishing trade, and had urged forward the leaving of cards at Lakenham. His inspiriting counsel to the youthful Donald, his son, was after this wise—

"Donald lad, ye maun be blinkin' at auld McCracken's lass. She's na a tocherless leddy. Dinna bide ower lang till other folks gets wind on her."

Acting upon this parental advice, the son and heir arrayed himself in a new pair of shepherd's plaid trousers of Glasgow cut and shape, and prepared to accompany his mother and sister upon their visit. The modest glory reflected by his garments on the parental looms was fully atoned for by Mrs. Nichol's gorgeous Paisley shawl. The fair Jessie added to the lustre of her family by her brilliant tartan sash.

Miss Rachel received this overwhelming trio with astonishing self-possession. The

pathos of her voice at once touched what Donald called his heart. Independently of the "tocher," here was a fair maiden he would be proud to win. There really was an appeal against fate in Miss McCracken's pathetic voice. She had sat many days waiting for the callers, who did not come, and these arrivals who came first were not after her taste.

The Bragges were the next people to call. They were certainly a link to county society, though but a feeble one.

Because old Madam Ringrose condescended annually to send the Bragge girls a card for a very dull garden-party, they were by no means included in her more important entertainments. At the county balls they danced chiefly with the officers or the sons of aliens, even accepting provincial bank clerks as partners when nothing better was forthcoming. It was only Miss Rose Bragge who was on occa-

sions more fortunate. For the sake of her handsome looks, a deserter would sometimes secede from the ranks of the county and lift her for the evening into a blessed sphere of superiority.

Mr. Bragge was a worthy old gentleman very amenable to his daughter's guidance. Having originally been a coffee-planter in the West Indies, he took a rather better position than such neighbours as drew their incomes from stocks or counting-houses. After all he was a landed proprietor, though under the equator.

It was about three months after her arrival at the Hall, when domestic matters were working smoothly, that Miss McCracken resolved to disestablish her *chaperone*. Of course Mr. McCracken was ignorant that the accomplished widow was a mere cipher in his daughter's hands. Rachel having gleaned from her all the advantage there was to be derived, resolved

to dismiss her. She was now quite conversant with social laws and customs and the manners of good society, Mrs. Fraser having diligently coached her in such observances. Besides, this elderly lady was sometimes tedious, not to say in the way. Rachel was of opinion that a totally independent career would be preferable. Upon the widow's removal her quondam pupil began to enjoy herself.

Hunting in Flatshire seems but a poor thing to men from the midlands. It meets here with scant encouragement from those who hire their covers and recognize no enjoyment in equine prowess. Perchance the vulpine nature is too much akin to that of the man of trade for him to love the chase. Nevertheless, such as hunting was, Miss McCracken elected to pursue the sport, and, if possible, to gain distinction thereby. When November came in, the young lady got herself twice a week upon

irreproachable animals, warranted to jump admirably, though they never had occasion to vindicate their capabilities. Considering that Miss Rachel had gained her knowledge of equestrian matters in a riding-school in the company of other Clapham young ladies, her conduct, to say the least of it, was plucky. The ambling palfreys, with rocking-horse monotony of action, which she had formerly ridden were widely different quadrupeds to the high-spirited animals she was now called upon to mount. Nevertheless she rode them with determination and without appearance of fear.

By December she had obtained a good reputation in the hunting field, perhaps by primary reasons of her neat figure and smart talk. She had pleasant recollections to fall back on over the fire at home. The admiring glances of handsome young farmers, the opening of gates by the brothers from the Abbey, with the broad

compliments of Donald Nichol, junior, were a sort of *sauce piquante* to spread over the dull days. Before Christmas, not only was Miss McCracken on speaking terms with many, but she began to coquet with the melancholy old master. Mr. Hungerford sang but on one note—a mournful strain concerning the decline of sport. In his youth he had dwelt in fast shires, where, according to his own report, he had cut a pretty figure over hedges and ditches. Fate had delivered over to him in the course of time an entailed estate of moderate proportions, and his own folly had handicapped him later in life with an unprincipled wife, who, in defiance of her clear duty, presented him annually with an unwelcome olive branch. He had fallen into the position of master to a subscription pack, and took his pleasure and responsibility with an incomparable sadness. Miss McCracken being the most conspicuous out of half a

dozen ladies who rode irregularly to hounds, because she was better mounted, better habited, more graciously mannered towards all men than the rest, could not escape any one's notice. She, however, gave no evidence of annoyance when her ladyship of Wrexham passed her by with a droop of her eyelids. If she inwardly chafed because the wives and mothers of her acquaintance knew her not, she smiled none the less sweetly.

Miss Pilkington, when she had called at the Hall, had at once recognized the fact that this sentry would be difficult to catch napping. Her hopes of storming the parent's heart subsequently went down to zero. Our plebeian little heroine went through many arduous labours about this time, not the least of these being the study of Burke. The discovery that the Pilkingtons were a branch of a family that came in with the Conqueror certainly raised

Olivia in her esteem, or, if not in her esteem, in her consideration.

"Papa," began Rachel one foggy morning in December, as she dallied with a late breakfast. This was a non-hunting day. "Papa, you know this is really a great deal duller than Clapham. No one asks us to entertainments here, and there isn't even a charity concert given at Bedmondstone. It is time for us to begin to be hospitable. Will you let me give a little dance at the New Year?"

This was no sudden impulse on the part of this young lady. Rachel was not a person who suffered from any impulses.

Yet if a bombshell had fallen at Mr. McCracken's feet he could not have looked more amazed. Our heroic Rachel had well weighed the form of her suggestion, and had given much consideration to the moment of its delivery. She contemplated her own be-ringed hands stedfastly after the assault;

for Mr. McCracken had prominent eyes, which were able to stare in an exceedingly offensive way. Rachel was conscious of the stare, and never moved an eyelash. In addition her papa had a trick of rattling loose money in his pockets, a habit extremely annoying to Rachel's ladylike instincts. Finding the stare unavailing to draw her regard from her diamond rings, he commenced to rattle loudly. She did not even faintly shudder. She knew better than to challenge speech. There were some very diplomatic talents well concealed behind that candid-looking brow—talents concerning which her coarse-grained parent knew nothing. It was a great advantage to Miss Rachel to be so exceedingly clever without her father's knowledge or perception.

To Mr. McCracken's mind Rachel was anything but clever. She had no talents that were marketable commodities. There was no outward visible sign about her of

the labour or money spent on her education, and the spiritual grace of a superior mother-wit had not revealed itself to his material mind. She was not a showy girl personally or in the matter of accomplishments, as he would have liked her to be, and as he was sure his outlay demanded of her to be. Most certainly he had grudged her nothing in the way of lessons and extras at her school, and yet she had taken no brilliant veneer. What a poor result for thousands of pounds spent on her education. An inflexible larynx and a faulty ear were visited angrily upon her. In spite of many singing and music masters, at a guinea a lesson, she could not play with any skill, or produce more than a feeble pipe. Once he had taken her abroad, with a view of testing her linguistic attainments, warranted superior. Her inability to interpret native German or Italian brought him into difficulties. He swore roundly that Herr

Müller and Signor della Bocca, who had vaunted their pupil's capacity, were liars. The unattainable good, to Mr. McCracken, was culture; accomplishments were held in high respect by him. I do not mean to imply that he himself aspirated his vowels with unseemly energy, or that his writing and arithmetic in his mighty ledgers were faulty. It was only in the untravelled region of classics and the fine arts that he felt himself at sea. He would hardly have believed that not infrequently noblemen are ignorant regarding art and letters, and that not a few of the men who claim a pedigree have an exceedingly shady knowledge of their own ancestors.

Thus it was grievous to him to know that Rachel, with educational doors open to her from childhood, had not taken the polish of accomplishments. She had a handsome prospective fortune, and might aspire to high things matrimonially. Mr.

McCracken had at one time deemed it not improbable that the glory of a coronet might shed its lustre on his name.

It was a melancholy fact, however, that the young lady's price could not be raised by such adventitious charms as playing on the harp or dashing off spirited sketches. The Muses were reverenced from afar by this biscuit-maker with much greater awe and humility than by their intimates, aware of their frail support. The sight of an easel or a grand piano provoked solemn sighs in Mr. McCracken's heart. In his disappointment over her failures, he took no heed of his daughter's natural gifts. He never looked for her diplomacy, or gave her credit for unlimited tact. She was too wise to assume any direct attitude of authority, so that he was unconscious that in spite of his bluster she pulled the strings which moved him in many directions.

Certainly he was aware that Rachel passed as a pretty girl, though even in the matter of her personal charms he under-estimated her attractions, these not being of a florid or majestic nature. He could well appreciate size or colouring, but a pensive expression and irregular features did not recommend themselves to his taste, when they crowned a slight and diminutive figure. Of course he expected that a certain number of moths would flutter round this light, which had a very golden shadow; for Rachel had a pretty little fortune from her maternal grandfather, leaving out of the question Mr. McCracken's settlement.

This dutiful parent had years ago braced himself to the task of keeping seductive seraphs with wily tongues and waxed moustaches at a distance. Such as these he deemed most likely to please a maiden fancy, having no gifts that

way herself. Only his preparations had been in vain, for this style of young man did not come to Clapham, or haunt Rachel's unfashionable resorts. In sooth, Miss Rachel, while yet in very short skirts, had been competent to instruct her parent where her interests lay.

Now, on this occasion she was equal to the task she had undertaken. Mr. McCracken, finding his steady gaze availed not, and that the clinking of loose coins did not stir her apathy, broke ground in speech, throwing all possible severity into his voice.

"A dance, Rachel! And pray where are your guests to come from? This cursed county will not supply *you* with anything better than butchers, bakers, and candlestick-makers. Don't you imagine, young lady, that my money has been so easily come by, that I'm willing to chuck it away on such tomfoolery. Entertain,

indeed! Let me hear no more of such nonsense."

Rachel gave no sign of contrition, nor made the feeblest attempt to palliate her bold proposition. She took no notice of a final derisive snort or the battering of an egg-shell. Only a shadowy smile hovered around her lips before she charged into the breach.

"Don't you think, papa, that the less you talk about bakers the better it would be? It's sailing very near the shop. Of course I quite understand that you are vexed because people don't, or won't, call on us. Do you really expect these grand folks about here to make a fuss of you like they do in the city? It's quite unreasonable, I'm sure. Why, there every one knows *who* you are, and when they eat your biscuits under your eyes, you don't require to look the other way. No one is ashamed of being in trade at Clap-

ham, of course. But here it is quite another thing, and you mustn't expect to leap into society all at once because you have changed your surroundings. You ought to be satisfied with small beginnings. I do assure you no one gets into society without a little creeping. You have never even asked your clergyman to dinner, though he lives at the park gates. Why, it was not worth his while to leave a card."

Rachel had a childish, plaintive voice, which she made good use of. It was a very efficient weapon of artlessness. No casual listener could ever suspect a taint of worldly wisdom behind those pathetic tones. The significance of her speech was often veiled by that voice, and people remembered afterwards, and were startled to remember, the sound sense and practical knowledge those sad tones had enunciated.

"Worth his while to call! 'Pon my

soul, girl, what do you expect of me? I'm not going to treat 'em all round for nothing, I can tell you. You want me to set my doors open to the small fry, do you? You think the rest of the county will flock in after. God bless my life! do you take me for a fool, Rachel, to think I'll pour hogsheads of my good claret down the throats of a set of snivelling parsons, poor beggars who don't know vinegar from Chateau Lafitte? Just let me see my Lord Wrexham tool his cart up the drive, or the Ringroses do the polite by me, and they shan't have cause to complain of my treatment."

Rachel had not exhausted her ammunition by a long way.

"You said that Sir Bruce Onslow was coming after Christmas. I suppose you intend to do something to amuse him. Of course old Mr. Wilson will talk stocks and shares, flour sacks and machinery with you

from morning till night. It may be instructive, but I wonder if it will be amusing to this young man. Is he commercial? or is he devout? Your company leaves no choice of entertainment for him. I live in hopes that the Wilson girls will beguile his weary hours with their African mission-work. They very certainly will not enchant him by their personal charms. Does Sir Bruce admire missionaries, or lend his assistance to bazaars, do you know, papa? What a very good young man he must be!"

The inquiring elevation of Rachel's eyebrows was very pretty.

"If Sir Bruce ain't satisfied with as good cover shooting as the world can show, and the best cellar of wine in the county, let him go hang up his hat and aristocratic airs in somebody else's house. He's no need to come, or to stay, if my company ain't good enough, with an alderman, who is bound certain to be next Lord Mayor,

and two pleasant-spoken girls with twenty thousand apiece to sit opposite him. What's he done in the world to look for anything better? He ain't made a fortune yet. I never heard that he could do more than scribble magazine articles, having the interest to get 'em puffed up in every paper. Yes—yes, he can play a bit on the fiddle, and live on three hundred a year. A baronet can get a deal out of rich friends."

Mr. McCracken had been hitherto decidedly reticent regarding the expected guest, of whose antecedents Rachel knew naught. At this descriptive statement of his qualifications she, being full of understanding, pricked up her ears. She shrewdly suspected that Sir Bruce would be a visitor her father would delight to honour. These incidental remarks, hazarded in a moment of impatience, did not throw her off the scent. Rather she interpreted

them as a fretful protest against society which, in spite of his pecuniary disqualifications, was apt to make much of this young man. The baronet had been introduced to Mr. McCracken at some city banquet to a newly returned explorer, in whose train came men of science and notable literary workers. Rachel had been curious concerning him, but had not ventured to press inquiries. There had been light thrown on his social status in more than one way.

Had not the best suite of apartments in the house been allotted to him, in spite of the expected advent of Mr. Wilson, a millionaire importer of grain? And had she not heard certain injunctions given to the keepers, which proved that the reception of an important guest was imminent?

The information now accorded by Mr. McCracken in an angry mood, though to the uninitiated ear full of disparagement,

conveyed to the girl's intelligence a very contrary impression.

Was it not ever Mr. McCracken's custom to depreciate all that he most esteemed? He would cry down the worth of a valuable picture he wished to buy, or underrate the services of a cook he wished to keep with consistent effrontery. And Rachel was now thoroughly convinced that their visitor would be cajoled with flattery and made much of. City knights, indeed, but never a real baronet had sojourned beneath his roof, and she expected that the forthcoming guest would be suffered the command of Mr. McCracken's property, not excepting herself. Still she forbore to display any feminine curiosity. Direct interrogation would put Mr. McCracken in an opposite mood. Having taken breath he now resumed with an abatement of wrath.

"We may as well, perhaps, ask our parson to dinner, since you seem so set on

it, though he don't look the right sort to enjoy a good feed. I'll be bound for it he'll be down on me for a subscription of some sort the next day. I'll be hanged if I give a blessed rap to any of these local charities, where you never see your name in print. Now mind, Rachel, I'll not have that Jezebel sister of his here."

"But Miss Pilkington is a very entertaining person, I assure you, papa."

There was no trace of ridicule perceptible in Rachel's manner.

"Well, I've said I won't have her, and you hear me. When Joseph McCracken says a thing he means it, too. There's the doctor, who lives in a good house on the Green. Seems a decent sort of man; looks as if he'd enjoy a bottle of fizz, and tell a good story. I had a word with him at the station last night, and he was deuced civil. Looking for our custom, no doubt. He ain't perhaps quite up to the rank of Sir Bruce,

but Wilson won't be a stickler for rank and county swells."

This compromise of local worthies to dinner did not by any means satisfy Rachel's ambitious soul.

"I suppose, papa, Sir Bruce will not stay long? Now, if I was alone, I could manage to amuse him in the evenings. There's bézique, and dominoes, and the photograph albums, if he's a well-behaved young man, and the billiard-table and his fiddle besides. A man with a fiddle is always happy if you sit at his feet. I would study that lowly attitude, only those Wilson girls will be in the way of idolatry. You may not worship any male thing in their presence."

To Mr. McCracken's mind, Rachel had a very objectionable way of expressing herself, but he was far from determining her method as satirical. He was not in any way humorous himself. His daughter uttered

her regrets now in a sort of meditative recitative, without any marked manner. Apparently she was seriously concerned for the entertainment of Sir Bruce.

"Oh, so you want some man to do the polite to the young ladies. By-the-by, there's a son of this doctor's you can ask up after dinner—a devilish good-looking chap, I can tell you. We came down in the same carriage from St. Pancras last night. Home on leave, he said; so I suppose he's a soldier. He tipped the porters like a lord, and gave himself more airs than one."

Rachel frowned discouragement. "But we don't know him, papa."

Mr. McCracken rattled his change loudly. "Oh, that don't signify. These kind of people ain't particular; they'll jump at our notice. I'll call and ask him and the doctor to take pot-luck some night next week."

As Mr. McCracken decided the matter

in an authoritative way, Rachel had the wisdom to make no rejoinder. Nevertheless she fully intended to give her dance in spite of the decisive veto put upon her proposition. She was very skilful in letting well alone, and managed her father's contrary moods with better judgment than many a matron who has served a long apprenticeship to her lord's irritable tempers.

CHAPTER IV.

RHETORIC.

MEANWHILE Rachel was not idle. Her busy brain plotted and schemed diligently to further her plan. Two evenings later, Mr. McCracken being in an after-dinner placable mood, she produced a sheet of note-paper, remarking, with a charming, unconscious air—

"I thought, papa, that you might like to see the list of people I have made out for our little party. You see, it will be quite easy to get forty or fifty together, and I should only call it a carpet dance. Let me see—here I begin with the officers from the depôt. I should ask them in a

body, and we should be sure of six or eight dancing men. Then there's young Mr. Hudibras and a couple of other men in the Bedmondstone bank. Next come the Nichols, with a friend of theirs staying at Bexham. I've put down the two Mr. Ringroses, because I often meet them in the hunting field. Of course I should invite them personally. The Browns at Woolston go out a good deal, and Mr. Brown, though he is a clergyman, I know is fond of dancing. You see, papa, I could soon muster twenty men, not counting Mr. Pilkington or Sir Bruce Onslow."

Mr. McCracken having a dish of walnuts at his elbow and a glass of port wine in his hand, was in a condition of plethora, of which Rachel was fully aware. Yet his brain was not charged to the verge of stupidity.

"You seem to have forgotten, my girl, that ladies form part of such an entertainment."

She rejoined softly, smiling, "Oh dear, no, not at all. I've provided plenty of partners. There's Miss Pilkington and her niece, to begin with." Mr. McCracken gave an unctuous laugh and emptied his glass. "I know," said Rachel, slightly changing colour, "that she's not very young, but she is attractive in her way, and I dare say makes up well in the evening. There are the two Wilson girls, and Miss Nichol, and Mr. Brown's sister-in-law. We may count on the Miss Bragges and the daughters of the clergyman at Minton, who called last week." Rachel had come to the end of her list, and bit her pencil meditatively, not to say sadly. In her own ears the list of ladies did not sound promising.

"It's a scratch lot, Rachel. By the way, you've left the Proteus people out of the list. Perhaps an archdeacon's family *is* a cut above the rest. Well, you shall have your own way this time. Do as you like

about your hop, but don't expect any good will come of it. Sir Bruce will wrinkle his nose a bit over such a mixed assortment as you're getting together, I'll be bound. He will soon find out that we city traders ain't good enough for the big folks hereabouts."

The Proteus people alluded to had called that very afternoon, to the biscuit-maker's unbounded satisfaction. When he came in from a walk to find their cards lying on the hall table, Rachel's dance was no longer such a doubtful matter.

The Rev. Gerald Proteus, by virtue of being an Honourable, the son of a renowned law lord, arrogated to himself a position, and, what is more, obtained it. He was known to be hand and glove with the Ringrose faction. Report did whisper unkind things concerning the eldest Miss Proteus and her devices to win Tom Ringrose. But this young man had fought a good fight against matrimony

so far, yet not having escaped scatheless from Love's darts.

Many and strange are the secret influences which work social miracles. On the first arrival of the McCrackens the Proteus elders, though abounding in love and charity, had decided that the biscuit people were vulgarians, not to be encouraged or acknowledged. But the astounding intelligence that the *dilettante* scholar and fine gentleman, Sir Bruce Onslow, a second cousin to Mrs. Proteus, was about to visit the tenant of Lakenham Hall, caused a reversal of the decree. Mrs. Proteus had received the news on the sure authority of her aunt, who was also aunt to Sir Bruce, and from whose testament both the archdeacon's wife and the impecunious baronet expected good or great things. What a happy chance was this that threw this young man in the way of her dear girls!

Mrs. Proteus had never met her cousin, though his fame was widely spread in the family; but of course they would all make his acquaintance now that he was coming into the neighbourhood. It was quite evident that these McCrackens must be superior to other folks in trade; no doubt people of cultivated taste and refinement. Sir Bruce was supposed to be so very fastidious. The leaving of cards followed.

Rachel, now fortified by the parental blessing on her endeavours, defied difficulty, and resolved that her entertainment should be a success. Her determination was equal to scaling the big social rocks that stood ahead of her. The fertility of resource in her clever little head was very great, and she put all her wits together in order that this affair might become a point of departure for future glory. Her guests were the great difficulty, and demanded much thought and scheming.

Certainly the nucleus of her company afforded nothing beautiful or attractive. It was true Sir Bruce Onslow might prove distinguished-looking, and he had the merit of a name well known in print. But there were others who could not be regarded so hopefully. A tremor passed over Rachel when she reflected on the appearance of Donald Nichol and his Glasgow friend. What would the Ringroses think of being asked to meet those uncouth Northerners? Probably, too, they would have their shins kicked in some wild evolutions, or their ears assailed by a Scottish war-whoop in the excitement of the dance. A horrible vision of Donald Nichol, arrayed in the full glory of a kilt, suddenly overwhelmed Rachel with confusion. She had seen a photograph of him in that attire in the drawing-room at Bexham. Perhaps it was his customary full dress on gala occasions.

There was yet a fortnight in which Rachel might labour.

Mr. McCracken had but a feeble conception of his daughter's heroic soul or social talents, when he declared no good would come of this attempt. Rachel's diplomatic mind was admirably fitted to deal with such difficulties. She was patient, insensible to rebuff, with a tenacious grip of advantage which qualified her for the front ranks. This little general in petticoats was indeed worthy to do battle with county society.

The following morning she was up betimes, hard at work at her writing-table. The notes of invitation to be despatched would require to be varied in judicious terms. It would never do to alarm some of the sober-minded people with any notions of great doings, or of a stir which would entail new gowns. To such as these, averse to expenditure, the

invitations were addressed in familiar and friendly terms.

"Would dear Miss Nichol, Mr. Donald, and their friend Mr. Cockburn, spend the evening at the Hall on the thirty-first, and join in a little carpet dance?"

Something of the same kind was despatched to the more gamesome clericals or their spouses. This would not entail more than the addition of white lace *fichus* and best caps to the Sunday black silk gowns. The officers at Bedmondstone, as also the Bragge and Proteus faction, must be lured by more formal cards. They were living too far off to guess the true state of affairs, and probably to a mere friendly gathering they would not think it worth their while to come. With a sigh of relief, Rachel placed her skilfully baited notes in the butler's hands for immediate despatch. Then she went upstairs, donned a new habit, and rode off with a brave

heart to strengthen her lines in a new direction. Bravo, Rachel!

It seemed at the outset of this endeavour that chance was ready to favour the manœuvres of this courageous young lady. On the way to Malham Cross two pink coats, espying her chestnut mare from afar, hastened out of the usual jog trot. Rachel, with a quick side glance at a bend of the road, perceived that Dick Ringrose was riding well to the rear of his brother. In right of his seniority and superior wits, or what he considered such, Tom snubbed this dull young man unmercifully. The heir to Ringrose Abbey had more than a just estimation of the rights of birth. He was mounted this morning on a peacocking bay, a new purchase, which seemed disposed to lose its good character by its restless demeanour. Tom, conscious of having started from home in irreproachable attire, was not now in the best of tempers. As

the pair drew nearer to her, Rachel's sharp ears caught a murmured expletive—

"Keep well behind, Dicky. Damn this brute! he pulls like blazes. I'll be plastered before I see the hounds."

As he rode up beside her, Rachel thought he would need much conciliation. She stretched out her hand with a brightening face.

"Well met, Mr. Ringrose. I thought you might not be out to-day."

Rachel contrived to throw a certain amount of interest into her words.

"I'm sure—now really—I feel honoured by your anxiety."

Dick was staring at the young lady in a clownish manner. This young man was unfortunately born a couple of generations too late, being a genuine type of Flatshire squirearchy fifty years gone by.

"But, Mr. Ringrose, I really did come out hunting to-day in the hope of seeing

you," said Rachel, arching her eyebrows in a pretty childish way. "I have a favour to ask you."

Dick here interposed with unusual quickness of speech.

"Ask me instead, Miss McCracken. Don't I always open the gates for you, and do I ever swear when I'm splashed? I'm your best friend."

Rachel's mare, excited by companions, was throwing its legs about, spattering mud on Tom's immaculate tops. His disgust was too evident.

"So you are looking for a reward for your good nature? Wait a bit; mine is a fair field."

This was not true at all where eldest sons were concerned. Tom had taken out his handkerchief, and was vainly endeavouring to remove mud-spots.

"What can I do for you to-day, Miss McCracken?" he said, still dabbing at imaginary specks.

"Do let me lend you my handkerchief," said Rachel, in well feigned concern. "Those pretty tops are quite spoiled. It's all my mare's fault." She extended a scrap of cambric. He waved it away with a supercilious smile. "I thought you would never forgive me," she said tragically; "but now you look pleasant I can venture to make my request. I want to know if you and your brother will come to my dance on the thirty-first. I can dance—really," she added, with a musical little laugh.

Mr. Ringrose must have heard something in her voice that her words did not actually express. Unto himself he said, "'Will you walk into my parlour? said the spider to the fly.'" It must be admitted that Mr. Tom was of a suspicious nature with regard to ladies' attentions. Aloud he commended Miss McCracken's enterprise, rejoining—

"By Jove! you are a plucky one to give

a party. No one does it hereabouts; not even my mother. I suppose you mean to bring most of your folks from town? There ain't any in Flatshire that can foot it."

Rachel's face was suddenly suffused with a tell-tale colour. Rebellious blood would not be stayed. Moreover, there was a decided flavour of condescension about the young man's speech which she did not relish. She dared not resent it at this moment; but woe betide you, Mr. Tom, at some future time if Rachel bears malice.

Suddenly the girl thought of Donald Nichol's kilt and a possible war-whoop. What if this invited guest should disgrace her publicly in the sight of the county?

"But will you come?" she said, looking up coquettishly without betraying her anxiety.

The Ringroses were people of such undisputed position. They would be a chief corner-stone to her entertainment. She

very well knew that at this moment her companion was looking her up and down. From the sole of her top-boot to the crown of her silk hat she believed there was no fault to be found. It is said that the consciousness of faultless attire lends an additional charm to woman. The charm of composure it certainly supplies. What woman does not feel happier for knowing that no critical eye can discern a button too few on the gloves, or a seam too many in the gown? And Rachel was well acquainted with all the sorrows of poverty, having plenty of relations glad to accept her old clothes. At this moment she suffered no anxious qualms regarding the cut of her habit, knowing it to be the work of a professional tyrant in the sartorial world, whose laws no fashionable folks despised. Tom Ringrose must have been satisfied with his inspection, for his reply was almost cordial.

"Charmed to join your party. The pleasure of the first waltz with you, Miss McCracken?"

The young lady breathed freely as she stroked her horse, ignoring the sultan-like colour of the assent.

"Of course it will only be a small affair. Yes, we shall have a few friends from town. Papa means to clear his covers before January. By the way, perhaps you may know Sir Bruce Onslow. He is coming to us. I believe he writes, and has made himself a reputation."

Tom Ringrose was a swell in his way. He prided himself greatly on his imperturbable coolness. On this occasion a low whistle escaped him.

"Bruce Onslow coming to Lakenham—to you? Know him? By Jove! I rather think so. We rowed in the same boat at Eton, and were at college together till the dean kicked me out. Bruce is a musical

beggar, you know; fond of the quill, too. He's one of the sort that does everything well. Your pheasants won't have time to say their prayers, for he's a crack shot. I hear he's been vegetating on and off in a German state the size of a table-cloth. Men at the club took odds he would bolt with the grand duchess. The deuce of a hand at love-making, Bruce is. Good-looking, ain't he?"

Rachel gave an indefinite nod. She did not wish to intimate that she and the coming guest were unacquainted.

CHAPTER V.

CONCERNING ARISTOCRACY.

Later in the day Tom Ringrose remembered that there would be guests at the Abbey for the New Year. They might as well participate in any fun that was going. He rode up to Miss McCracken once more to beg for an extension of her invitation to a couple of his friends. The lady smiled heroically, consenting graciously, though the weight of the male element was already a sore affliction. Still such a distinguished weight as it promised to be! Had not Mr. Tom muttered some lord's name? If she could only conjure up a few great or attrac-

tive ladies it was possible that the affair might go off with *éclat.*

As she rode about the fields, and acquaintances approached to exchange salutations or remarks, a more than usually pensive expression was to be noticed on her face. It became her admirably. There was none of the aggressiveness of a prosperous tradesman's daughter about her.

Rachel's eyes observed the movements of the Countess of Wrexham attentively. This lady led her lord about from cover to cover. A run was an exception, for the distinctive feature of hunting in Flatshire was the absence of foxes.

The noble lady whom Miss McCracken watched appeared to be unaware of any observation. Still she perfectly well knew that her brother was constantly beside the young person from Clapham. This singular gift of vision without direct glances belongs exclusively to the fair sex. It is open to

question if some cannot see at the back of their heads.

Lady Wrexham took great care on this occasion to keep her husband close at her side. She was nothing if not jealous. His lordship was a very irregular man in the hunting field, and it so happened that Rachel was a stranger to him. He had not long returned with his wife from the north, where an obstinate old uncle lay dying, yet refusing finally to forsake the flesh.

As the countess rode through a gate opened by her husband, Rachel pressed after. She smiled a gracious acknowledgment in sign of Lord Wrexham's service. Her flute-like "Thank you" compelled this young man to lift his hat. To be just, Rachel only knew that he was young and polite. He was in her eyes a well-looking man in shabby attire. Certainly his garments did not in her opinion qualify him to be an earl.

"That's a nice-looking girl on the chestnut, Tom, and it's a tidy nag, too," said his lordship a few moments later, the gracious smile still lingering in his recollection as he rode up to his brother-in-law. "Where does she hail from?"

Mr. Tom Ringrose glanced in the direction indicated by a nod of Lord Wrexham's head, knowing well enough that there was only one fair maid in view.

"Old biscuit-man's daughter from Clapham. Worth a pot of money, they say. He has taken Charteris's place, and has turned half Gillow's shop into it. Vulgar old boy. Wears two diamond rings, with dirty nails, swears at his keepers, and buys everything wholesale. Dick and I are going to dance at Lakenham next week. The Lord knows who we shan't meet."

If he was anything, Lord Wrexham was a Radical by inclination. He had no difficulty in defining the political principles

which had been allotted to his name before his birth, but there was a decided looseness about his thoughts and actions which did not correspond to the Conservative principles of the family. The fact of trade pushing its way in the county did not offend him.

"Wish I'd a share in those biscuits! There's £ *s. d.* in that mare, and the girl is well turned out. You'd swear blood lies sometimes. That one looks like breeding. Beauty ain't encouraged hereabouts. Introduce me, Tom."

There was a twinkle in Lord Wrexham's eye. Both the men were shuffling along a narrow lane in deep mud, out of which her ladyship had kept. Tom was now hopelessly bespattered. He turned and looked steadily at his sister's husband.

"No, no, Wrexham, that won't do. There'd be the deuce to pay. Keep your head straight in double harness, my boy.

Miss McCracken is well enough. The Proteus girls can't hold a candle to her; but such sweet biscuits ain't for you. I say, look the other way."

The earl did look the other way, and espied his wife cantering over a field in hot haste. She was coming towards him. Tom discreetly changed the subject.

"New beast that of yours. A bit weedy, ain't it? Not a broken-down racer? What made you put Laura on such an old cow? and where on earth did she get her habit?"

Tom, who habitually wore an eye-glass, had it fixed as he gazed at the approaching figure. His lordship, smarting from the previous snub, answered straightway in his wrath—

"Needs must when the devil drives. Why, she'd ride a rhinoceros sooner than let me go out alone. Getting fat, Laura, ain't she? Takes after your family. My

mother and grandmother were as thin as lamp-posts."

Tom, who had a great regard for his own figure, did not like that palpable hit. Corpulence was the dreaded bugbear of his life at eight and twenty.

Laura, Countess of Wrexham, once upon a time Miss Ringrose, of Ringrose Abbey, ignorant of turf temptations, and dutifully devout in village ministrations, had taken kindly to evil practices under her lord's roof.

Her emancipation from the leading-strings of a pious, worldly mother, had resulted in an upsetting of early convictions.

It was said that this apt pupil had incited her master to some frantic plunges. Be that as it may, at the present hour the lady was palpably sitting in sackcloth and ashes. None could deny to Lady Wrexham the superior virtue of courage. Her indifference to public opinion at this period

of strict economy and retrenchment was marked. She wore antiquated garments with unabated cheerfulness, setting an example of fortitude. When a diminishment of state had become imperative, Mrs. Ringrose of the Abbey had intimated that it would be more decent to retire to another county; for the family held her to be in dire disgrace while inhabiting the tumble-down dower house, with a stockbroker reigning magnificently at the family seat. Laura's cheerfulness under this cloud of misfortune, as well as the shabby appearance she paraded before the county, was derogatory to her title.

The lady, resenting the strictures of her family on her husband's misdeeds, brooked no interference with her own. She did not openly quarrel in sight of the public with her people, it having been instilled carefully into her mind that there was no greater sign of ill-breeding than to expose

private differences to the eyes of the multitude. Therefore Lady Wrexham's dirty linen was not washed in the sight of country gossips, though every one knew that dirty linen was carried between the Abbey and Ellesmore Lodge.

It was quite to be expected that a certain coolness should establish itself between mother and daughter, when the daughter cherished a spirit of opposition to the mother's hereditary principles.

Mrs. Ringrose came of a family of high degree, rumoured of royal descent, and, perhaps, for this reason arrogated to herself absolute government.

To violate her tyrannical laws indirectly was the revenge taken upon her by her undutiful daughter.

The little Lord Ellesmore was generally sent to spend the day at the Abbey, riding on a donkey, and clothed in a strong corduroy suit, like a gamekeeper's lad. On

occasions his father took him to a race-meeting at Oldford. The next day he was invariably sent to visit his stately grandmother, primed with turf anecdotes, and hero-worship for popular jockeys. Once, sorely aggravated by some bitter tirade against her husband's folly, Laura had placed a little betting-book in the child's pocket. As was but natural, he produced this charming novelty at Ringrose, to the honourable madam's anguish. Laura had even dared to write on the first leaf, "Train up a child in the way he should *not* go, and when he is old he is sure to depart from it."

With her brothers Lady Wrexham remained always on terms of apparent amity. She had done Tom good service some years back—a service which, however, he did not care to be reminded of.

When Oldford races were going on, neither of the young men from the Abbey

scrupled to make use of their sister's house, though they professed to be scandalized by her shabby appearance and outlandish equipages.

Classical authorities divorce obesity and jealousy. We have poetic precedent to warrant that leanness mostly accompanies suspicious fears.

Now, her ladyship was, without doubt, jealous; but none could declare that she was not fat also. Though the healthy hue of her cheek never turned to a haggard sallowness, yet the green-eyed monster held her his slave.

She certainly had no cause to vex her soul concerning her lord's affections. All his heart that was not fixed on his boy was given to his stud. Yet so unreasonable and impracticable was she, that when he was out of her sight the hours were literally "damned to her."

He had won her easily ten years ago;

perhaps, too easily, as she knew best. She had been, in *chaperone* parlance, "getting on" then; that is to say, she had been six and twenty, and his lordship two years her junior. Suitors for Miss Ringrose's hand had been backward, and London seasons year after year availed not to decide her fate. Society was surprised, very much surprised, when the match was announced, for it was well known that the happy pair had been familiarly acquainted all their lives. Perhaps Miss Dormer, insignificant old maid though she was, was nearer the mark than her audience would admit, when she declared, during a discussion on the various causes of matrimony—

"'Tis propinquity that does it."

Propinquity had certainly done for the doctor when he wooed Charlotte, also for one or two others in the vicinity with whom Miss Dormer was acquainted. But

the more romantic of the party laid stress on natural affinities, denying the potent influences of habit. However, the little old maid continued secretly to maintain her theory, believing in "propinquity" in spite of the aggrieved matrons, who would not suffer their good fortune to be attributed to constant association. To marry a man, or a man to marry you because you were constantly thrown in each other's way, and had common bonds of talk and deeds and facts to refer to, was sweeping away all the sentiment which women love to cherish to the last. The ladies assembled were disposed to visit Miss Dormer's unusual temerity of speech with some cruel allusion to spinster ignorance of men's hearts and ways.

It had certainly not been Mrs. Ringrose's fault if the young earl and Laura had not seen enough of each other before marriage. Yet Lord Wrexham had always been re-

garded as a butterfly, unlikely to settle on any fair flower for years to come.

He had early embarrassed his estate to pay off racing debts, and was altogether walking in a way unsatisfactory to the elders. When he suddenly, without any apparent increase of ardour, proposed to Laura Ringrose, the surprise was general. People at once concluded that he had sowed his wild oats, and that henceforth no tares of unrighteous gambling would depreciate the value of his acres. Laura's ten thousand pounds were tied up fast, and a charge made on the estate for her benefit. Then they were married. But there had subsequently been a sad falling away on his lordship's part, and tares began again to spring up a goodly crop.

At the time our story begins all outlying properties uncntailed had been disposed of, and mortgages were a burden. Yet Laura had put her shoulder to the wheel

with the intention of pulling the family coach out of the ditch, for the sake of her son.

Retrenchment here, there, and everywhere. No servants, or carriages, or gowns to speak of. Without great intelligence, she was a woman of mettle. With as much energy as she had shown in girlhood in village administration, and in early married life in racing matters, she exercised her economies in maturer years, inspired by maternal sentiments.

With her eyes on the property and farms, all the advantage to be got out of them would be derived. It was necessary to be on the spot. No agent or deputy could take the same keen interest as she did in the cutting down of trees and the executing of repairs; therefore, she braved opinion and snapped her fingers in the face of her parents and their laws of aristocratic procedure.

On the arrival of the McCrackens in September, she and her lord had been visiting an infirm relative, from whose favours of game and hospitality she never turned her face.

It was worth while travelling up to Perthshire for a three months' visit. It enabled her to place her own servants on board wages, and to wear out the oldest of her old clothes. Moreover, the little lad, her son, was delicate, and the bracing mountain air was quite as beneficial to him as a visit to the seaside, and much less costly.

On the occasion of her last visit the old man had been taken ill. Laura had nursed him conscientiously for awhile, but as he refused to die, or to get well, she finally lost patience with his vagaries, and returned to the Lodge before winter snows set in. Since her arrival she had twice met Miss McCracken driving her pony phaeton about

the roads. Having taken stock of her personal charms, and noted the quality of the showy cobs, her ladyship thought it would be as well to keep Lord Wrexham out of the way of such attractions. But she made inquiries on all sides about these new people who were such near neighbours. For the life of her she could not help meddling with the affairs of her neighbours wherein she did not betray specially a blue-blood nonchalance.

As she rode home this day by the side of her lord, he commented in his customary frank way, a way that ought to have disarmed suspicion, on the appearance of the biscuit-maker's daughter.

"Did you see the girl from Lakenham, Laura? I'd give a hundred and fifty for that nag of hers to-morrow."

Her ladyship applied her whip smartly to her venerable steed, though it was doing its best to stumble homewards.

"If you'd got it, I suppose you mean," she said snappishly.

"Upon my life, Laura, you do take a man up short," he rejoined sulkily.

They jogged on awhile in silence. But the man, being good-natured and full of speculation, presently forgot his partner's gibe.

"Tom is taken with that girl, I do believe. And there's your mother as proud as Lucifer, refuses to call. Before she can turn round she'll find a daughter-in-law in the wind, the stupid old fool. Stolen fruits are always sweetest, and Tom is a pig-headed beggar, with all his conceit, if he gets a notion in his head. He thinks he knows better than other people about most things."

Lady Wrexham did not object to her august mother being designated "a stupid old fool," but she did resent the notion that Tom might be doing court to this

daughter of trade. Since a certain occurrence a few years back, she had constituted herself the guardian of his matrimonial interests.

"But Tom is not such a fool, George, I can tell you, though he often appears one. I don't suppose he means anything. If the girl likes to be compromised it's her look out. A man's reputation doesn't suffer if he rides after a different woman every season. She isn't much to look at—a pale-face chit, as thin as a herring."

Her ladyship habitually disparaged thin women. Lord Wrexham turned his gaze on her ample charms, and observed an ominous flush on her cheeks.

"That's a sort that do a power of mischief sometimes," he said gloomily. After a pause he continued, "It's my belief that Tom doesn't want your mother to call. He's trying to run dark. He said some nasty things of old McCracken, though he is no

end civil to the daughter. But he's going to a dance there at Christmas. I'll bet he sets Dick on to follow the girl and keep other men off."

This was really too much.

"What!" cried Laura, in fierce wrath at deception being practised on her family. "Then, it's time to put a spoke in this wheel of Tom's. Mamma never *has* called on any city people who come, and never will. She'd pretend not to know there was a tradesman living in the county if their carriages drove over her. But I'll call, see if I don't. Tom shan't get in a mess again without I know something about it."

The lady looked at the hedges as if for approval of her heroic self-sacrifice on the altar of the family welfare. Laura, with jesuitical casuistry, stifled the voice of conscience. Surely *this* end justified the means. Before she reached home she not only succeeded in choking conscience, but

evolved, phœnix-like, from the corpse of her prejudices new principles of action. Hereditary laws concerning strangers she abandoned, taking kindly to the notion of patronizing the new-comers. She would make a proper stand on her title and become a ruler as great as her mother. On private and public grounds mamma made herself objectionable with her domineering ways. Why should she at her advanced years still remain the great lady of the district? She must certainly be deposed to make room for another. The sceptre prerogative naturally belonged to the countess, though she had not immediately after her marriage asserted herself, being, in fact, taken up with more interesting things. Then, after a period of enjoyment, the financial crisis had come, with the result of the dower house being tenanted, when reproaches were heaped upon her, and she was expected to eat humble

pie and play very second fiddle. That subordinate part had been slow work for Laura, and the seeds of rebellion long hidden in her heart sprouted vigorously at this touch of opportunity. Sundry little saplings had been cut down and withered already by madam's authority. But Laura would no longer admit that the fallen fortunes of the house of Wrexham denied her any rights. It was certainly not a large income alone that entitled a lady to governance. Her rank fully authorized her to give the law socially, and to patronize worthy or meritorious people.

The Ringrose entertainments were notoriously dismal affairs. Ellesmore Lodge would, of course, have to frown on costly dissipations, inasmuch as it could not rival the state dinner parties at Ringrose Abbey, where sideboards were loaded with ponderous plate, and Mrs. Ringrose presided majestically, in black velvet gown and

plumed head-dress, over every delicacy out of season.

But her ladyship would be even with Mrs. Ringrose in another direction—a field where enterprise would effect much. In considering this matter Laura's spirit rose. She would organize a subscription ball in the Town Hall. The annual county celebration came off in September at the beginning of the shooting season, under the patronage of the lady of the Abbey. If it was possible to stir up interest, Laura would get up another ball in January. This entertainment would be her peculiar institution. It would cost her nothing beyond her patronage; yet the honour and glory of the proceeding might be great. Mrs. Ringrose had made herself especially obnoxious recently by her inquisitive remarks concerning a certain colt, reported to be in training surreptitiously at the lodge. Her daughter had sought vainly

for days some method of retaliation or annoyance. The occasion had now come. Calling on the McCrackens would cut many ways. She could do good service by protecting Tom from dangerous machinations, while she at the same time departed from the laws of precedent which were irksome to her. Of course there would be no necessity to bring her lord in close contact with Miss McCracken. Laura flattered herself she could keep that young lady in check. She would go and leave cards at Lakenham to-morrow, and send little Ellesmore on to the Abbey to let his grandmother know what his mamma was about.

END OF VOL. I.

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